

INFERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

You find us in a jubilant mood here in those shadowy depths of the Black Library devoted to assembling Inferno! magazine. The unremitting gloom of the endless shelves has been lightened by the use of a short length of festive bunting. The shambling ranks of cowed acolytes, heads bowed as if each bearing the weight of the collected knowledge of this vast repository, seem to be walking with a spring in their step. There is even talk of a cake. For yes, Inferno! is four!

As is traditional at such times, it's beholden to me to say that it doesn't seem like four years have passed since we published the first issue of Inferno! I am also required to add a note expressing our delight that so many of our readers from back then are still with us, along with many more who are only now discovering the savage joys of our dark and gothic fiction from the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. Oh, and that we are truly humbled by the range of new talent we have discovered and

nurtured over the years, talent which has now allowed us to launch our successful range of novels and Warhammer Monthly comic too.

All of this is true, of course. But here in the webway we prefer to direct most of our gaze towards the future. Which in a more mundane fashion means that we spend most of our time not looking back with nostalgia, but looking forwards with anticipation to the killer new stories and features that are due your way in the next few issues.

What's that? Give you a hint of what they are now, so you can get even more excited? Hardly! Where's the surprise in that?

Talking of surprises, this very issue is something a bit special – it's an all-Warhammer issue. A few issues back, you may remember, we had an all-Warhammer 40,000 issue of Inferno!, so quite naturally we decided we had to redress the balance at some point. Since this issue has our own contribution to the awesome new Dark

Shadows campaign, Gav Thorpe's first visit to the newly revealed land of Albion in 'Tybalt's Battle', plus the second part of Ralph Horsley's Chaos epic, the first of several planned Graham McNeill yarns about his ambassador to Kislev, and a brace of other hot new fantasy stories. Of course, we'd be very keen to hear your thoughts on the topic of 'themed issues'. Do you like to read a selection of stories with one setting, featuring a particular Warhammer race or based around a specific topic? As always, drop us a letter or an email to the usual address.

Next issue we'll be back to our more usual mix of carnage and mayhem from the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. And here in the depths of the unknowable Black Library, we'll all be back at our lecterns, heads bowed and voices hushed, as we search the dusty archives for more great stories to bring you.

Marc Gascoigne
Editor

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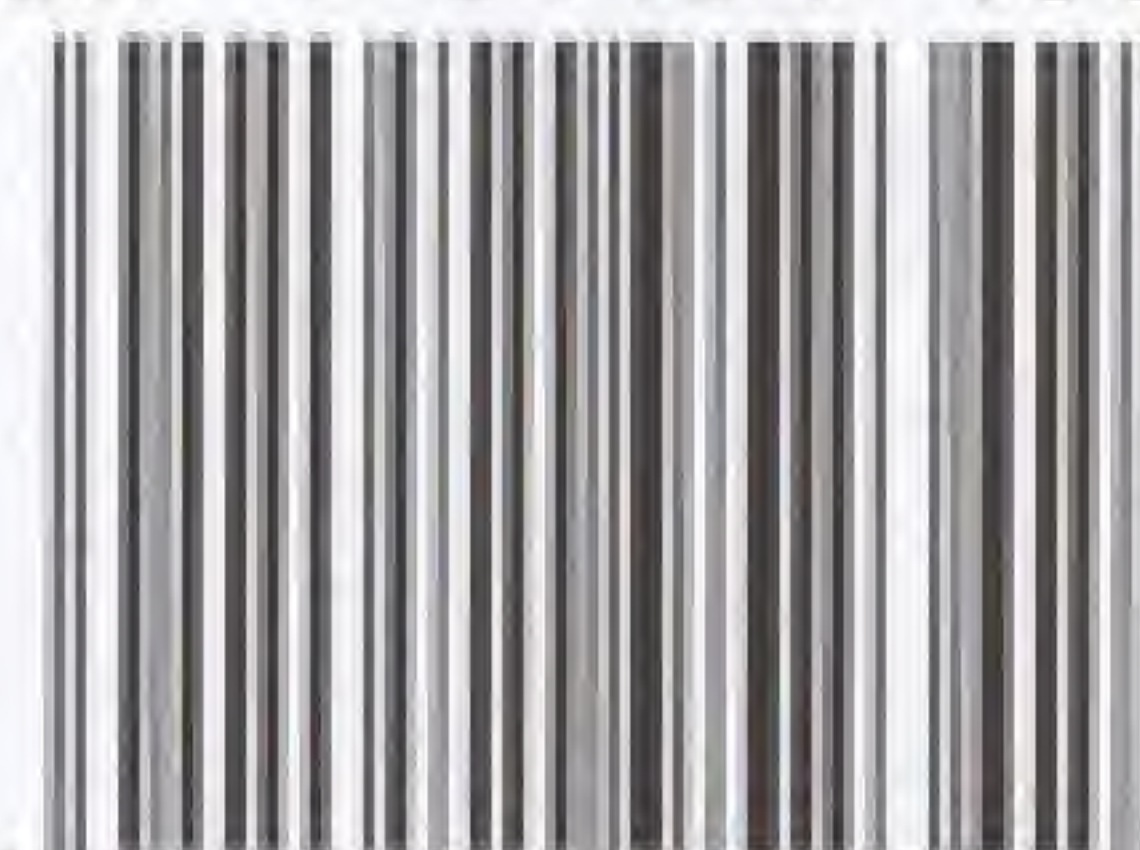
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THE AMBASSADOR

by **Graham McNeill**

KASPAR VON Velten reined in his bay gelding and stared up at the great walled city of Kislev, unwinding a woollen scarf from around his face. The day was chill and his breath misted in the air before him. His deep-set blue eyes were wide and friendly, but were set in an expression of tense anticipation. His skin was tanned and leather-tough from years of campaigning. Beneath his wide brimmed hat, he wore his silver hair close cropped, his beard similarly neat and trimmed. A faded tattoo from his days in the ranks snaked its way across the skin behind his left ear and down his neck.

Snow covered the crenellations at the top of the wall and sunlight glittered from the spear points and armour of soldiers walking the ramparts, their fur-lined cloaks flapping in the wind. Kaspar's trained eye swept the length of the wall and took in the lethal nature of the defences. Machicolations were cunningly wrought within the decorative stonework at the wall head and smoke curled lazily upwards from prepared braziers on the ramparts. The precise construction of the protruding towers and gatehouse ensured that every yard of rocky ground before the walls was a killing zone, covered by crossbows and cannon fire. An attacker would pay a fearsome toll in blood to breach these walls.

The rutted roadway wound up the Gora Geroyev, the Hill of Heroes, to a studded timber gate banded with black iron and protected by murder holes in the stone roof.

Kaspar had never been to Kislev before, but he knew good fortifications when he saw them. These walls were amongst the most steadfast defences he had ever laid eyes upon, at least the equal of Nuln's or Altdorf's. However, unlike either of those cities, Kislev's walls had a smooth, glassy look to them, as though the stone had vitrified under intense heat. History related that, in times past, the forces of Chaos had broken themselves against these walls and that their mutating powers had made the solid stone of the walls run like molten wax.

He had fought such abominations in the past and triumphed. Foul beastmen in the Drakwald Forest and dark Chaos warriors in armour of bronze had fallen to his blade and those of the armies under his command. If he listened hard enough, he could still hear the clash of steel on steel from those long ago battles. But those were wars of another age. Kaspar had not led men in battle for nearly ten years and though he hated to admit it, he now missed the responsibility of command. Ironic, since during all his years as a general in the pay of the Emperor Karl Franz, he had looked forward to the day he and his wife, Madeline, could retire to Nuln and the great libraries and museums of his home.

So, when age and younger officers hungry for battle had forced him to put his years of campaigning behind him, he relished the prospect of peace. He had been content, but after Madeline's death, the isolation had been terrible. He was a man of action and was ill equipped for a life of peace alone. Perhaps if her heart had not

failed her things might now be different.

'Sir?' came a voice behind him. Stefan sat scowling on the buckboard of a red liveried carriage, the horses' reins held loosely in his one good hand. Two wagons, their contents covered with oiled tarpaulins, trailed the group, the drivers shivering in the cold while the horses impatiently stamped the snow-covered roadway. Sixteen knights in shining plate armour ringed them, lances held aloft and faces obscured by their helmet visors. Damp panther pelts lay limply across their shoulder guards. The Imperial standard and Kaspar's personal heraldry flapped noisily in the stiff breeze from a knight's banner pole.

'My apologies, Stefan,' said Kaspar. 'I was just admiring the fortifications.'

'Yes, well I'm chilled to the marrow and your old bones don't take well to this cold either. Why you insist on riding when you have a perfectly good carriage is beyond me. We should get inside the city.'

The knight riding alongside the carriage turned his head, his displeasure at Stefan's familiarity obvious despite the lowered visor. Many an Empire noble would have had his squire flogged for speaking in such a familiar tone, but Stefan had fought in the ranks alongside Kaspar for too many years for either of them to put up with such formal nonsense.

'You're right, of course. And less of the "old". You're even more decrepit than I am.'

'But much better preserved. I'm more like a fine Tilean wine, you see; I improve with age.'

'If by that you mean you become more like sour vinegar, old man, then you're right. But yes, we should get inside.'

Kaspar dug his heels into the horse's flanks and dragged the reins in the direction of the city gates. The lead knight also spurred his horse, riding alongside Kaspar as they neared the gate. He raised his helmet guard, revealing a frowning face, lined with concern and experience. Kaspar slapped a gloved hand on the knight's shoulder plate.

'I know what you're thinking, Kurt,' said Kaspar.

The knight, Kurt Bremen, said nothing, his eyes scanning the men on the battlements. Several of the soldiers trained bows on them as they approached and his frown deepened.

'All I am hoping is that the soldiers up there don't have loose bow fingers,' replied Bremen. 'How you permit your servants to address you is none of my concern. My only priority, ambassador, is to see you safely to Kislev and then return to the Empire.'

Kaspar nodded and followed Bremen's stare. 'You don't think highly of the Kislev soldiery, Kurt? I commanded many of them in battle. They are men of courage and honour. Their Winged Lancers are the equals of any Empire knightly order.'

Bremen's head snapped round, his lip twisted in a sneer before he saw he was being baited. He returned his gaze to the walls and nodded slightly. 'Yes,' he allowed, 'their lancers and horse archers are a worthy addition to an army, but the rest are lazy Gospodar scum. I'd sooner entrust my flank to a free company.'

'Then you have a lot to learn about the Kislevites,' snapped Kaspar and pulled ahead of the knight.

The gates swung wide on well-oiled hinges and Kaspar found himself confronting a man with the longest, bushiest moustache he had ever seen. Over his rusted metal shirt he wore a threadbare surcoat depicting the bear rampant. Behind him stood a detachment of armoured soldiers with crossbows and spears. He cast an appraising eye over Kaspar before sliding his gaze across to the carriage and wagons behind him. Avarice glittered in his eyes.

'Who are you?' he finally barked, obviously drunk.

Bremen opened his mouth to speak, but Kaspar silenced him with a gesture, dismounting to stand before the gatekeeper, who was chewing messily on a chicken leg. The man's eyes were bleary and red and he had trouble focusing on Kaspar. His breath was foetid and stale.

'My name is Kaspar von Velten, the new ambassador to the court of Tsarina Katarin the Great. I demand you and your men

remove yourselves from this gateway immediately and allow my party to enter the city.'

Kaspar pulled a scroll bearing a wax seal embossed with the Imperial eagle from within his doublet and waved it beneath the gatekeeper's veined nose. 'Do you understand me?'

In a brief moment of clarity, the man noticed the Knights Panther and the Imperial banner and stumbled backwards. He waved a hand vaguely in the direction of the soldiers behind him who gratefully retreated into the warmth of the gatehouse. Kaspar replaced the scroll and swiftly swung back into the saddle. The gatekeeper sketched a drunken salute to him and Kaspar smiled as the man said, 'Welcome to Kislev, sir.'



KASPAR BLINKED as he emerged from the darkness of the gateway into Kislev. A cobbled esplanade filled with market stalls and shouting traders lay before him, the air thick with the smell of fish and sound of cursing voices. Three streets led deeper into the centre, each one similarly choked with people and pack animals. Kaspar inhaled the pungent aroma of the bustling city. The buildings here were well constructed of stone with snow-covered tile roofs. The clatter of wagon wheels sounded behind him and pulled his horse to one side as Stefan drove through the gate.

'So this is Kislev,' he stated, unimpressed. 'Reminds me of Middenheim. Too cramped.'

'You can whine about the city later, Stefan. We have to make our way to the embassy. I want to get there before our intoxicated friend sends word ahead.'

'Pah! That drunken fool probably doesn't even remember us by now.'

'You're probably right, but it won't hurt to be sure.'

He waved his hand at the three streets and said to Bremen, 'You've been here before, Kurt. Which is the quickest way to the embassy?'

The leader of the knights pointed up the central street, 'There. The Goromadny Prospekt leads through the city to Geroyev Square. The embassy is behind the high temple to the wolf god.'

Kaspar laughed. 'Even in their town planning they thumb their noses at us, putting a Sigmarite nation's embassy behind Ulric's temple. Oh, they are sly, these Kislevites. Come, let us be on our way. I want to give Ambassador Teugenheim a nasty surprise today.'

The wagons and carriage began forcing their way slowly along the Goromadny Prospekt. The streets were thronged with people hurrying about their business, well-dressed in warm fur cloaks and woollen colbacks. They were a fierce-looking people, Kaspar noted, shorter than most folk of the Empire, but they carried themselves proudly. Here and there he could see grim, swaggering figures clad in armour and furs, reminiscent of raiders from Norsca. Bremen and Valdhaas, the knight with the banner pole, parted the sea of scowling peasants with their warhorses, Kaspar and the others followed behind.

Lining the gutters and street corners, limbless beggars were pleading for a few kopecks and painted whores hawked their wares with weary resignation. Much like any city in the Empire these days, reflected Kaspar. But despite the bustle and noise of the inhabitants, there was an undeniable tension in the faces he saw, as though people did not wish to linger outside any longer than they must. Strange...

A flash of colour further up the street drew his gaze and he saw a gleaming dark green carriage coming from the opposite direction. The design was old fashioned but regal and Kaspar noticed that the Kislevites moved clear of the carriage's path without the grudging slowness that accompanied his own passage. The lacquered door bore a crest depicting a crown encircling a heart and, as the

carriage passed, Kaspar caught a glimpse of a smiling woman with raven black hair through the open window. She nodded towards Kaspar and he craned his neck to follow the carriage as it travelled the way they had just come. Soon it was lost to sight, turning a corner to follow the line of the city walls.

His attention distracted by the identity of the woman, he was forced to pull back sharply on the horse's reins as a black-robed figure jumped right in front of him. The man's garb marked him as one of the Kislev priesthood and his face was lit by an expression of zealous fervour that Kaspar instantly disliked. He touched the brim of his hat respectfully and pulled the horse left to move round the man, but the priest stepped into Kaspar's way once more. Not wanting any trouble with the local church, Kaspar forced a smile and pulled his horse away again. Once more the priest moved to block his path.

'You will be judged!' the priest yelled hoarsely, 'The wrath of the Butcherman shall fall upon you! He will cut out your heart for a sweetmeat and your organs will be a banquet for his delight!'

'Ho there fellow,' snapped Kurt Bremen, riding in front of Kaspar. 'Be about your business. We don't have time to dally with the likes of you. Go on now!'

The priest pointed a long, dirt-encrusted finger at the knight. 'Templar of Sigmar, your god cannot help you here,' he sneered. 'You will die with the Butcherman's blade in your belly and his teeth tearing the flesh from your bones!'

Bremen drew his sword partly from its scabbard, showing the dirty-faced priest the gleaming blade meaningfully. The man spat on the ground in front of Bremen and turned tail, sprinting nimbly away from the knight. The crowd soon swallowed him up and Bremen let the sword slide back into the scabbard. 'Mad,' he said.

'Mad,' agreed Kaspar and rode on.

The Goromadny Prospekt ran through the city for almost half a mile, widening into a tavern-lined boulevard until it opened into the wide, granite-flagged Geroyev Square. Hulking iron statues of

long-dead Kislevite tsars dominated the centre of the square and around its perimeter were ornate buildings of red stone with onion domed towers and narrow windows. Knots of bearded, black-robed priests, similar to the man who'd accosted them on the Goromadny Prospekt, stood around the square, deep in conversation.

In the grassed centre of the square a wide corral had been set up with scores of ponies being walked in circles before a baying crowd of prospective buyers. These were plains ponies, sturdy beasts that thrived in the harsh climate of Kislev, but were slower on the gallop than the grain-fed horses of the Empire. Even at this distance Kaspar could see that many were sway backed. He gave none more than six months to live.

He angled his course towards a massive red stone edifice adorned with symbols of Ulric, statues of wolves flanking the black wooden doors. A narrow street ran along the side of the temple, the buildings either side shrouding it in darkness.

Kaspar waited until his carriage and wagons caught up with him before heading down the deserted street which led into an open courtyard area with a bronze fountain at its centre, a patina of green covering its every surface. A dirty brown liquid gurgled from a small angel's cup, filling the fountain's bowl.

Behind the aged fountain and a rusted iron fence was the embassy of the Empire.

Kaspar had expected the embassy to appear somewhat rundown, but nothing had prepared him for the state of neglect and air of abandonment he now saw before him. Windows were boarded up with lengths of timber, the stonework was cracked and broken and illegible Kislevite graffiti was daubed across the doors. Were it not for the two guards lounging on halberds, Kaspar would have thought the building deserted.

'Sigmar's hammer!' swore Bremen, appalled at the embassy's appearance. Kaspar could feel his fury mounting towards Andreas Teugenheim, the man he was to dismiss and replace. To have allowed an outpost of the Emperor to fall

into such a state of disrepair was unforgivable. He rode through the sagging, open gate and as he approached the building, he saw the guards finally register his presence. Kaspar took no small amount of satisfaction from the look of alarm on their faces as they saw the Knights Panther and the Emperor's banner fluttering behind him. Had he not been so angry, he would have laughed at their pathetic attempts to straighten their filthy uniforms and come to attention. They couldn't know who he was, but would realise that anyone distinguished enough to have an Imperial banner and sixteen Knights Panther for an entourage was clearly a man not to be trifled with.

He halted before the door and nodded towards Kurt Bremen who dismounted and approached the fearful guards. The knight's face was set in a granite-hard expression as he cast his critical eye over the two men.

'You should be ashamed of yourselves,' he began. 'Look at the state of your weapons and armour. I should put you on a charge right now!'

Bremen snatched one of the halberds, its edge nicked and dull, and tested the edge with his thumb. Blunt. He held the weapon in front of the guard and shook his head.

'If I were to try and enter this building, how would you stop me?' he bellowed. 'With this? You couldn't cut your way through an Altdorf fog with this edge! And you, look at the rust on that breastplate!'

Bremen spun the halberd and jabbed the butt of the weapon hard against the man's chest. The breastplate was rusted through and cracked like an eggshell.

'You men are a disgrace to the Empire! I shall be having words with your commanding officer. I am relieving you of duty as of this moment.'

The guards withered under his verbal assault, eyes cast down. Bremen turned to his knights and said, 'Werner and Ostwald, guard the door. No one enters until I say so.'

Kaspar dismounted and stood beside Bremen. He jabbed a finger at one of the guards and said, 'You, take me to Ambassador Teugenheim immediately!' The man nodded hurriedly and opened the embassy door. As he scurried through Kaspar turned to Kurt Bremen and said, 'You and Valdhaas come with me. Leave the rest of the men here with the wagons. We have work to do.'

Bremen relayed the orders to his knights and followed Kaspar and the guard into the embassy.



THE INTERIOR of the embassy reeked of abandonment, the air of neglect and emptiness even stronger now they were inside. The timber-panelled walls were bare of hangings and the floorboards were discoloured where carpeting had obviously been ripped up. The guard reluctantly ascended a wide staircase that led up to the next storey with Kaspar, Bremen and Valdhaas following behind. The man was sweating profusely Kaspar noted, his every movement furtive and nervous. Like the ground floor, the second level of the embassy had been stripped of furnishings and decoration. They walked along a wide corridor, footsteps loud on the bare boards until finally arriving at an ornately carved door.

The guard pointed at the door and stammered, 'This is the ambassador's study. But he... well, he has a guest. I'm sure he won't want to be disturbed.'

'Then this really isn't his day,' snapped Kaspar, twisting the handle and pushing the door open. He entered a room as luxuriously furnished as the rest of the building was empty. A huge oaken desk and drinks cabinet dominated one wall while on another, a log fire blazed in a marble fireplace before two expansive leather chairs. Seated in them were two men enjoying snifters of brandy and cigars. One man was obviously a Kislevite, with a drooping moustache and swarthy

complexion. He regarded Kaspar and the knights with only mild interest. The second man, whip thin and dressed in a red and blue doublet sprang from his seat, spilling his drink as he rose. His face was a mask of outrage, his cheeks flushed. He slammed his brandy down on a small table and screamed, 'Who in the name of Sigmar are you? What the devil are you doing in my private chambers? Get out, damn your eyes! I shall call for my guards!'

'Go ahead, Teugenheim,' said Kaspar calmly, 'for all the good it will do you. I doubt one in ten of them has a weapon that wouldn't shatter on the armour of these knights here.'

Bremen stepped forward, resting his hand on his sword hilt. Ambassador Teugenheim blanched at the sight of the two fully armoured knights and the panther pelts over their shoulders. He stole a glance at the seated man and licked his lips, suddenly wary.

'Who are you?'

'I'm glad you asked,' Kaspar said, holding out the same sealed scroll he had earlier shown to the gatekeeper. 'My name is Kaspar von Velten and this will explain everything.'

Teugenheim took the scroll and broke open the seal, quickly scanning the contents of the document. He shook his head as he read, his lips moving soundlessly.

'No... you can't,' he wheezed slowly, sinking into the leather seat.

'Yes. I can,' said Kaspar, his tone venomous. 'Andreas Teugenheim, you are hereby dismissed from the post of ambassador and placed under house arrest by order of his majesty, Emperor Karl Franz. You have betrayed the oath of office of an Imperial ambassador. You have embezzled money and possessions that are the rightful property of the Emperor. I shall have you transported back to Altdorf where you will be tried and, if found guilty, hung by the neck until dead.'

'You have no proof -'

'I have all the proof I need right here!' shouted Kaspar, indicating the opulence of the room. 'We have sworn statements, written records, everything. You're finished, Teugenheim.'

Kaspar noticed that Teugenheim kept throwing pleading glances over towards the seated figure. He turned his attention to the man and asked, 'Sir, would you be so good as to give me the pleasure of your name?'

The man rose from the chair and Kaspar suddenly realised how huge he was. The man was a bear, broad-shouldered and slab-muscled. His gut was running to flab, but his physical presence was undeniable. Bremen moved closer to Kaspar and stared threateningly at the man, who grinned indulgently at the knight.

'Certainly. I am Vassily Chekatilo, a personal friend of the ambassador.'

'I am the ambassador now and I have heard of you, Chekatilo. So unless you have some business with me, then I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave.'

'You talk big for a little man,' rumbled Chekatilo. 'Especially when you have your shiny soldiers with you.'

'And you are a fat man who doesn't understand simple requests.'

'Now you are insulting me,' laughed Chekatilo.

'Yes,' said Kaspar, 'I am. Do you have a problem with that?'

Chekatilo grinned and leaned in closer, 'I am not a man who forgets insults, von Velten. I can be a good friend to those who remember that. It would be foolish of you to make an enemy of me.'

'Are you threatening me in my own embassy?'

'Not at all... ambassador,' smiled Chekatilo, draining the last of his brandy and taking a huge draw on his cigar. He blew the smoke into Bremen's face and laughed as the knight spluttered in the blue cloud. He dropped the cigar butt and crushed it into the carpet with his boot.

'Vassily...' pleaded Teugenheim, his eyes filling with tears.

'Be silent!' thundered Chekatilo. 'Don't worry, Andreas. I will take care of everything. I promise.'

Kaspar stepped closer to Chekatilo and hissed, 'Get out of my embassy. Now!'

'As you wish,' said Chekatilo, 'but I warn you, I am a powerful man in Kislev and you would do well not to forget that.'

Chekatilo pushed past Kurt Bremen towards the door and sketched a mocking salute to him before departing with a derisory laugh. Kaspar fought down his anger and turned to Valdhaas, pointing at Teugenheim.

'Take him away. Lock him in his apartments and keep him under guard until we can arrange his transport back to the Empire.'

The knight saluted and dragged the protesting Teugenheim from the room. Kaspar slumped down in one of the chairs and rubbed his forehead with both hands. Bremen stood beside the fireplace and removed his helm, tucking it in the crook of his arm.

'Now what, ambassador?'

'Now we try to clean up this mess. We get this place back on its feet and make it a post worthy of the Empire.'

'Not an easy task.'

'No,' agreed Kaspar, 'But that's why they sent me here.'

Or at least part of the reason, he reminded himself.



NIGHT WAS falling as Kaspar walked to the window and stared down at the street below, again pondering over his appointment to Kislev. Publicly, it would be the Imperial bureaucracy policing its own and rooting out corruption, but in reality it was damage control. His exact knowledge of what had gone on in Kislev was limited, although he did know that Teugenheim had been diverting the Emperor's funds into his own and others' pockets. In all likelihood no one really knew the full extent of his crimes, except perhaps the anonymous sender of the documents that had sparked off the investigation into the ambassador. From what he'd heard, a sealed package

had arrived at the Imperial court in Altdorf some four months ago with damning evidence of Teugenheim's illegal dealings. Something in the package had been significant enough to convince officials that its contents were genuine and wheels were set in motion to have Teugenheim replaced with the minimum of fuss. But the identity of the sender remained a mystery.

Years before this, Kaspar's wife, Madeline, had made sure her husband was a regular visitor to the royal court at Nuln. She understood better than he the value of the Countess-Elector Emmanuelle von Liebewitz's patronage and, despite his protestations, dragged him to every one of her legendary masked balls and parties. His tales of battle and life on the campaign trail always thrilled the effete courtiers and made him a popular, if reluctant, guest at the palace. After Madeline's death, he'd withdrawn from court society, spending more and more time alone in a house that suddenly seemed much bigger and emptier than before. Invites to the palace had continued to arrive at his door, but Kaspar only attended only those functions he absolutely had to.

On one such occasion almost two months ago, while attempting to extricate himself from a particularly drink-sodden courtier at the palace, he'd discovered the awful truth behind the death of the Countess's 'brother' in Altdorf some years before. The commonly held fact was that Leos von Liebewitz had been killed in a duel with a lowly watchman named Kleindeinst over a matter of honour. The truth of the matter was far more horrifying and Kaspar was astute enough to realise that his possession of such knowledge was dangerous.

When the courtier was found face down in the Reik two days later, Kaspar was not surprised and knew it was only a matter of time until the trail led to him. He knew he was too well-liked a figure in Nuln to be murdered out of hand, but understood that the countess would not permit a man like him, whose opinion and words were respected, to remain in the city while privy to the true circumstances of Leos's

death. She would know he would be unable to mask his revulsion at what she had forced upon Leos.

He remembered the day he had been summoned to the court of the countess and felt the familiar feelings of anger and bitterness flare once more. He didn't know how she had arranged for his appointment to Kislev, but how convenient it must have seemed that Teugenheim's imminent disgrace had coincided with her need to have Kaspar removed from the Empire. The appointment to Kislev had very nearly broken his heart. To be effectively banished from his beloved home, the land he'd fought for and bled to defend his whole life was almost a physical pain. He would have refused, but the sense of duty and honour the army had hammered in would not let him. That and the risk that the impulsive countess might have him killed after all.

Kaspar had left for Kislev within the week.

He sighed and drew the heavy drapes across the window, moving towards the crackling fire in the hearth.

The tremendous crash of the door slamming open startled him from his melancholic reverie and he spun, reaching for his sword. A hulking figure with an enormous grey beard filled the doorway, carrying a bottle of clear liquid in one hand. He stepped into the room and placed the bottle on the table next to the leather chairs.

'By Olric!' he rumbled, 'I am told that we have new ambassador here, but no one tells me he is so ugly!'

'Pavel!' laughed Kaspar, as the man strode towards him. The giant pulled him into a crushing bear hug and laughed heartily. Kaspar slapped his old friend's back and felt immense relief wash through him. Pavel Korovic, a fellow campaigner from his days in the army, released him from the embrace and cast his gaze over Kaspar. A savage warrior, Pavel had been a great friend to Kaspar during the northern wars and had saved his life more times than he could remember.

'Perhaps you look less ugly when I am drunk, yes?'

'You're already drunk, Pavel.'

'Not true,' protested the giant. 'I only drink two bottles today!'

'But you'll drink more, won't you?' pointed out Kaspar.

'So? When I rode into battle I had drunk many bottles before we fight!'

'I remember,' said Kaspar, picking up the bottle. 'Did your Lancers ever fight sober?'

'Fight sober? Don't be foolish, man!' roared Pavel, snatching the bottle back from Kaspar. 'No Dolgan ever went into battle sober! Now we drink kvas together, like old times!'

He yanked the cork free of the bottle with his teeth, spitting it into the fire and took a mighty swig of its contents. He passed the bottle to Kaspar.

'It is good to see you again, old friend!'

Kaspar took a more restrained swig and handed the bottle back, coughing.

'Ha!' laughed Pavel. 'You go soft now you not in army! You cannot drink like old Pavel, eh?'

Kaspar nodded between coughs. 'Perhaps, but at least I'll never be as fat as old Pavel. No horse would take your weight now.'

Pavel patted his round belly and nodded sagely. 'That I give you. But Pavel does not mind. Now Pavel carries the horse instead. But enough! We will go now and drink. You and I have much catching up to do.'

'Very well,' said Kaspar, knowing that he would be in for a night of serious drinking. 'It's not as though there is much I can do here tonight. And anyway, what in Sigmar's name are you doing here? I thought after the army you were going home to the steppes to breed horses.'

'Pah! My people, they say I am lichnostyob, a lout, and do not want me back! Pavel comes to the city and Uncle Drostyia gets him job in the embassy as reward for years of loyal service in army. They call me the Kislevite liaison to Imperial ambassador. Sounds impressive, yes?'

‘Oh yes, very impressive. What does it actually mean?’

Pavel sneered. ‘With that dung-spreader Teugenheim, it means I can drink most of the day and get to fall asleep in office rather than smelly tent on steppes. Come! We go and drink at my house. You will be guest until you are rid of Teugenheim!’

Kaspar could see that his old comrade in arms would not take no for an answer. He smiled: perhaps it would be good to catch up with Pavel and relive the old days. Besides, with Teugenheim locked up in the ambassador’s apartments above he had no quarters of his own and he did not relish the prospect of staying in a tavern while more suitable dwellings were sought. He put his arm over Pavel’s shoulder.

‘Let’s go then, old friend. I hope you have more of that kvas at home.’

‘Have no fear of that,’ Pavel assured him.



KASPAR SIPPED his kvas as Pavel threw back another glass of the powerful spirit. The Lancer’s tolerance was legendary and the years had not lessened his capacity for the drink. Kaspar could feel the effects of the alcohol already and had been nursing the glass in his hand for the past hour. Two bottles had been emptied and his companion was now roaringly drunk. They sat before the fireplace in Pavel’s kitchen, barely five hundred yards from the embassy, the wagons and carriage safely tethered within the courtyard of the townhouse. Stefan had declined Pavel’s offer of lodgings, preferring to stay at the embassy where he could begin assessing what needed to be done to make it more presentable. With the exception of Valdhaas, who stood guard outside, the Knights Panther had taken quarters at the embassy. Kaspar did not envy the slovenly soldiers billeted there the wrath of Kurt Bremen.

Pavel grinned as he poured another drink and belched. Despite all outward appearances, Kaspar knew that Pavel was a shrewd man indeed. A number of highly lucrative contracts to provide mounts for the Kislevite army had made him a very wealthy man.

‘So tell me more about this Chekatilo,’ Kaspar said.

Pavel hiccuped and scowled at Kaspar. ‘Very bad man,’ he said finally. ‘He is nekulturny, no honour. He is killer and thief, runs everything illegal in Kislev. Has many fingers in many things. All must pay his “taxes” or suffer. Fires, beatings. Killed his own brother, they say.’

‘So what was he doing with Teugenheim then? Were the two of them in league together?’

‘With Chekatilo, nothing surprises me. Teugenheim was probably selling off embassy to him,’ suggested Pavel, ‘Who knows, maybe we get lucky and the Butcherman will take Chekatilo.’

Kaspar’s interest was suddenly piqued. He’d heard the name already. ‘Who is this Butcherman? I had some mad priest raving about him to me earlier.’

‘Another bad one. A madman,’ said Pavel darkly. He lit a pipe with a taper from the fire and passed it to Kaspar. ‘No one knows who the Butcherman is or even if he is man at all. He kills men, women and children then vanishes into shadows. He cuts out victim’s heart and eats their flesh then takes their head. The Butcherman kills many and city watch cannot catch him. A bad one indeed. People are afraid.’

Kaspar nodded, remembering a similar spate of killings in Altdorf some years ago, the so-called ‘Beast’ murders. But the murderer had eventually been caught and killed by the watchman, Kleindienst.

‘How many people have been murdered?’

Pavel shrugged. ‘Hard to say. Dozens probably. But people die all the time in Kislev. Who can say if all are the work of the Butcherman? You should forget about him. He is crazy and will be caught and hanged soon.’

Kaspar drained his glass and slid it across the table towards Pavel. He stood and stretched, saying, 'I don't doubt you're right. Anyway, I'm exhausted and have a busy day ahead of me tomorrow. I have to meet the rest of the embassy staff and I would prefer to do that without a hangover. I think I'll call it a night.'

'You do not want to stay up till dawn and sing the songs of war? You are soft now Kaspar von Velten!' laughed Pavel, gulping down his kvas.

'Maybe, Pavel, but we're not the young men we were,' said Kaspar.

'Speak for yourself, Empire man. Pavel will drink the rest of bottle and sleep beside the fire.'

Kaspar said, 'Goodnight, Pavel,' and headed to bed for some much needed sleep.



THE DREAM always began in the same way. He dreamed of Madeline, dancing with her at the palace in Nuln, spinning gracefully across the marble dancefloor to the approving glances of the other guests. He was smiling as he spun his wife around. Then he caught the eye of the Countess-Elector and the smile became a snarl of anger. The dancefloor slid out of focus, swirling and reforming into a stinking Altdorf alleyway. Rain fell in soaking sheets and Kaspar felt the familiar terror form within his belly.

He saw a beautiful red haired girl, an expanding circle of dark blood pooling around her corpse. As he watched, a graceful figure leapt away from the body, a flash of green velvet and the glint of steel claws the only hint of the attacker's identity. But Kaspar knew only too well who had killed the girl. His gaze took in the horror visited upon her flesh and his stomach lurched in revulsion. Wetly glistening entrails spilled from her torn belly and a mass of cuts had torn her chest

to bloody strips. Her dead eyes met Kaspar's.

'Why didn't you help me?' asked the dead girl.

'I didn't know...' sobbed Kaspar, 'I couldn't have helped.'

'You can't help me now,' she said, turning her head. 'No one can.'

Kaspar sank to his knees, his stomach knotting in pain and sorrow for the dead girl and knowing there was worse to come. But then the substance of the dream shifted and Kaspar detected something different this time, something he'd not experienced before. An acrid stench, smoky and pungent filled his nostrils, the smell of burning. The conscious part of his brain screamed at him as the death-filled alley mercifully began to fade into the darkness. A darkness which resolved itself into the shape of timber beams above Kaspar's head.

He blinked, experiencing the momentary disorientation of waking, staring at the ceiling of the bedroom. Slowly his eyes became more accustomed to the darkness as the dream gradually drained from his memory. Yet one facet of the dream remained, the steadily growing smell of smoke and burning. He swung from the bed and pulled on his britches and overshirt, treading lightly on the cold floor. The hackles on the back of his neck were standing to attention and the instinct for trouble that had served him so well as a soldier was screaming danger at him.

He opened his trunk at the foot of the bed and withdrew a short, stabbing sword, its edge glittering in the wan moonlight. Padding to the door, he pressed his ear to the jamb. He could hear sounds of movement and muffled voices from further down the hallway. Briefly he wondered if it might be Pavel stumbling drunkenly to bed, but he was sure he could make out more than one voice.

The smell of smoke came again and he knew that something was very, very wrong. He pulled open the door and ghosted through, sword at the ready. A

flickering sliver of steel registered in the corner of his eye and he jerked back as an axe blade slashed past his head. The edge bit into the doorframe, splinters flying and Kaspar swung with his sword in the direction the blow had come from. The awful sensation of steel slicing across skin and a grunt of pain told Kaspar he had wounded his would-be killer.

The shadowy form lurking beside the door to his room struggled to free the axe from the wood. Kaspar thrust with his blade and felt it slide between his assailant's ribs. The man fell and Kaspar twisted his sword to avoid the suction of flesh, blood pouring from the wound as he dragged the blade clear. Kaspar crouched, searching for any other foes, but saw nothing. He moved to the window and drew back the thick velvet drapes, allowing light from Mannslieb and Morrslieb to flood in.

His attacker writhed on the floor, blood gushing from a deep wound in his chest, his eyes glazing over in death. More worryingly, thick tendrils of grey smoke writhed up the stairs and Kaspar could hear the hungry crackle of fire from below. He sprinted to the end of the hall, looked over the banister and saw flickering orange flames devouring the bottom of the stairs. Two men, dressed in dark furs, poured oil over the walls and floorboards. One glanced up, caught Kaspar's eye and grinned, exposing blackened and yellowed stumps of teeth. He pantomimed drawing his finger across his throat and laughed as flames leapt up the stairwell.

Kaspar pounded down the stairs, leaping over the flames and cannoned into the man. They tumbled across the floor and Kaspar lost his grip on the sword. The man spewed a string of expletives in his native Kislevite tongue as Kaspar sprang to his feet, stifling a gasp as he felt a searing pain in his knee where he'd landed.

His eyes swept the room and saw the glinting metal of his sword, lunging for it as the second firestarter dealt him a thundering body blow. They tumbled to the floor in a tangle of limbs, flames

licking further across the room filling it with smoke and heat. He'd be burnt to death unless he could defeat these two quickly. He scrabbled for the sword hilt and yelled, 'Pavel! Wake up damn you!'

A fist smashed into his jaw and his mouth filled with blood. He twisted his head rapidly as more blows rained down. Kaspar brought his knee up into his attacker's groin and the man roared in pain. He thundered his fist into the man's neck, crushing his larynx and rolled aside as the second man hammered a huge axe down where his head had been. He slid across the floor and swept up his sword as the man came at him again.

He could see his opponent was unskilled, but with an axe that size, it wouldn't matter. Kaspar backed away, feeling his hair and skin beginning to burn as the flames ripped around the room. Every item of furniture was ablaze: the drapes, the chairs, the paintings and the rugs from Cathay. Smoke boiled across the ceiling and the glass of the windows shattered inwards, the flames greedily feeding on the fresh air.

Kaspar knew he had to find Pavel and get out of the building before it collapsed around his ears. The heat from the blaze was becoming intolerable! Suddenly his foe screeched in agony as his cloak caught fire and he spun, windmilling his arms in a futile attempt to extinguish the flames. Kaspar immediately seized the opportunity and lunged forwards, plunging his sword deep into the man's body. Blood spurted over his hands and the sword was wrenched from his grip as the man screamed and spun away.

The fire spread wildly over his body, transforming him into a blazing torch, limbs wreathed in flames which eagerly devoured his flesh and bones. He screamed horribly, lurching around the room like a drunk with a foot of Empire steel in his belly. Kaspar fell to his knees, his head swimming with nausea, his vision blurring and his throat rasping. He couldn't breathe and his chest heaved for lack of air. He tried to drag himself towards the window, knowing it was his only chance of survival. The axeman

collapsed, a human pyre at the foot of the stairs and Kaspar knew that he could not escape the flames, his strength was gone. His eyes shut as an immense weariness overcame him.

Suddenly he felt a strong grip encircle his body. Kaspar groaned as he was heaved across a pair of broad shoulders and felt himself being carried across the blazing room towards the blessed coolness of the window. A sudden sensation of motion and weightlessness and then the air was knocked out of him as his body slammed into the stone paved courtyard before Pavel's house.

He gratefully sucked fresh air deep into his lungs like a drowning man breaking the surface of the sea and immediately felt his head begin to clear. He looked up and saw Pavel Korovic, soot smeared and singed, but alive, grinning wryly at him.

'Never a dull moment when we are together eh?' gasped Pavel. The ex-lancer helped Kaspar to his feet and together the pair swayed and staggered their way to the street as Pavel's house finally surrendered to the flames and collapsed inwards with a crack of splintering timber and stone. A crowd had begun to gather and Kaspar could hear the shouts for the fire watch being carried through the streets. The tang of smoke caught in his throat, but could not disguise the stench of cooked human flesh.

Safely away from the devastated house, the pair stopped and rested against the side of another building, sliding to the street and gasping for air. Kaspar's chest heaved in exhaustion, his head clearing by the second. He noticed an armoured figure lying at the gates to the house slowly beginning to stir. Valdhaas, no doubt. Thinking of the callousness of the men within the house, Kaspar was surprised they hadn't killed him.

'Pavel,' gasped Kaspar, 'What the hell just happened here?'

Pavel shrugged. 'Damned if I know. But a man like me, well, I make enemies, you understand?'

Kaspar nodded, but had the feeling that Pavel wasn't telling him everything. No matter, whatever local disputes Pavel had was no concern of his. He was just glad none of his men had been killed.

The sound of pounding feet came to him and he reached for his sword before realising it was gone. He looked up to see Kurt Bremen and the Knights Panther, armoured only in their breastplates and carrying their swords, sprinting towards them. Within seconds they had formed a protective ring of steel around the new ambassador.

'Ambassador,' demanded Bremen, 'are you alright, are you hurt?'

Between heaving breaths, Kaspar replied, 'I'm fine, Kurt, I just need to get my breath back. I'm too old for this kind of thing.'

Bremen then noticed the swaying figure of Valdhaas and swore, his already grim expression becoming one of barely contained fury. He despatched a knight to check on him and turned back to Kaspar, saying, 'Sigmar damn this place! Who did this?'

Kaspar shrugged. 'I don't know, Kurt, but we should stick around and help in finding out.'

Bremen was quick to grasp the implication of Kaspar's words and shook his head, saying, 'I am needed in the Empire. My men are needed there.'

'I need you here,' said Kaspar, his voice laden with years of authority and command. 'You saw the men back at the embassy. You and your warriors have to train them properly, to make them into real soldiers. This isn't a request, Knight Panther, it's an order.'

Bremen said nothing for long seconds before snapping, 'Damn you,' and turned away.

Kaspar glanced at Pavel and their eyes met.

'Thanks for letting me stay in your home,' he said dryly.

Pavel answered with a resigned nod and said, 'Welcome to Kislev.' *



WHITE DWARF

White Dwarf is Games Workshop's monthly magazine. Each issue showcases all the latest games and miniatures and is packed with exciting articles including tactical advice on how to get the most from your army on the field of battle, tips for painting your miniatures and tense battle reports highlighting the trials and tribulations of commanding an army.

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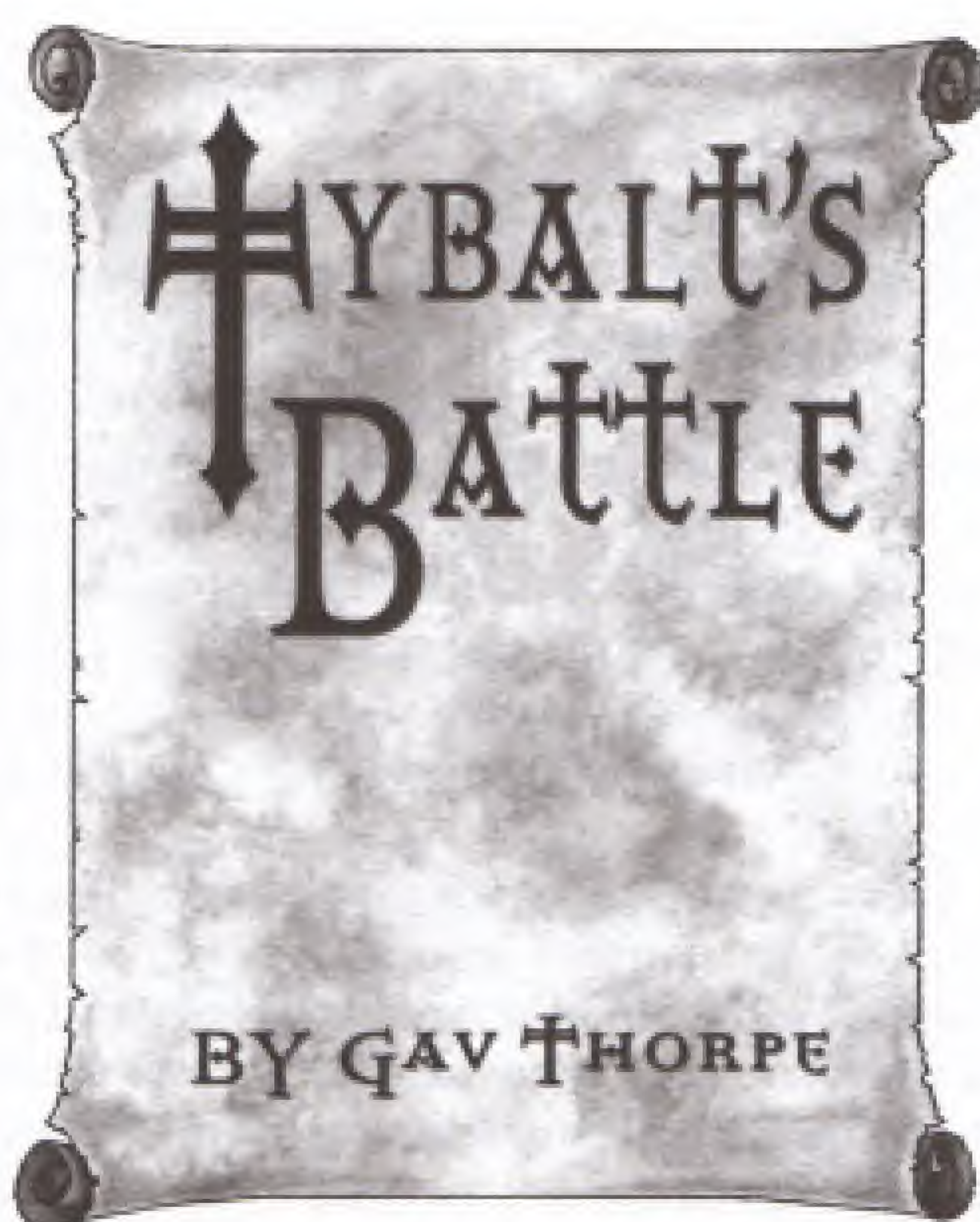
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RAIN LASHED down from the dark clouds, spilling into the wind-tossed waves. Thunder rumbled and in the flicker of lightning a white cliff could be seen rearing out of the water, the sea crashing against the rocks in a foamy turmoil. Tybalt stood on the prow of the rolling ship, steadying himself against the rail and trying to ignore the queasiness in the pit of his stomach which threatened to boil up inside him. It was not just seasickness that assailed him. As he looked at the forbidding coastline, Tybalt felt a quiver of fear. He had no idea what awaited him on this strange land, what dangers lurked on the mystery-shrouded isle of Albion.

As in the past, he was here at the bidding of the shade of Duke Laroche. The dead knight had come to him again in his sleep several months ago. He remembered the encounter vividly. It was if he had just woken, the light of the twin moons pouring through the window of his chamber. A breeze stirred the bed clothes about him and he had risen, his mind disturbed as if he had woken from a nightmare. He had been pouring himself a goblet of water from the jug by the bedside when a sussurant hissing had come to his ears. Turning towards the window, he saw a shape there, etched in the white and green moonlight of Mannslieb and Morrslieb, glowing faintly.

'Young Tybalt, it is I,' the duke had said, and the foreboding in the young knight's heart had disappeared at the sound of the noble's deep, reassuring voice. 'You fared well in your last quest, and you have my gratitude for protecting my grave.'

'I am honoured to have served you, milord,' Tybalt had replied, bowing his head to Duke Laroche's ghost.

'Then you will be doubly honoured. Your service is needed once more,' the duke had told him.

'The cemetery?' Tybalt had asked, aghast at the thought that he had somehow failed, that perhaps some other evil had arisen to disturb the duke's resting-place.

'Nay, Tybalt, all is well where my bones lie,' the shade shook his head. 'The last time we spoke, I told you of a rising evil, a great darkness that threatened all the lands.'

'I remember,' Tybalt had said. 'You said that all men of courage and valour would be needed to fight it.'

'Indeed I did. That time is nigh, young Tybalt,' Laroche had told him solemnly. 'Across the waves, on the Isle of Storms, the armies of this evil power are mustering. Everything is laid waste in its wake, the ground itself withers and dies at its feet, the dead tremble in their graves at its passage. All who serve the cause of the light and the just must take up their arms, for it cannot be left to hold sway of the Isle of Storms.'

'Milord, where is this Isle of Storms?' Tybalt asked, but the ghost of the duke was already disappearing, its shimmering form dissipating into a mist that drifted through the walls, leaving Tybalt alone once more.

The next morning Tybalt had told his father of the visitation. The baron had believed him, and said that while Tybalt found out where this Isle of Storms could be found, he would muster a force for Tybalt to lead there. Tybalt's researches had taken him several months, but finally he had located his answer in an old dockside tavern in the port of Brionne. The sailors had a legend, a tale of Albion, the Isle of Storms far to the north. The myths claimed that no one could land there, that treacherous fogs and mists surrounded it and any who strayed too close ran aground and perished on the sharp rocks. It was also said that the bellowing of giants and other fell creatures could be heard above the crashing waves

and that thunder and lightning constantly crashed and flickered above the land.

Legends aside, there was other news too. Ships' captains had reported seeing the Isle of Storms rearing from the waves, the fogs lifted. Although none had yet set foot there, there was much talk of expeditions and conquest, of ships being laden for travel and mercenaries gathering in the harbours, eager to sell their swords for the rich promises told of in the legends of Albion.

Tybalt had sent word to his father to despatch the army to Brionne while he procured transport. Many of his inquiries had been greeted with derision, as the delusions of a young knight eager for glory. He had resolved to tell no one of the dead duke's apparition, for the duke had earned his rest and if word spread who could tell what manner of ne'er-do-wells would scour the hills and mountains for the grave of the ancient hero. Dejected after a week of laughs and scorn, Tybalt had finally met Captain Garond of the merchantman *Brionne Breeze*. He had run across the affable old man in the Red Dragon Inn, one of the more reputable establishments along the waterfront. They talked over a bottle of fine Quenelles wine, and the agreement had been secured. Tybalt would hire the *Brionne Breeze* for a trip to fabled Albion, and in addition to the payment promised by Tybalt the wily old captain would receive one-tenth of any treasures found on the isle by Tybalt or his men. Tybalt would have happily given Garond everything; he was not interested in treasure hunting, merely obeying the command of Duke Laroche. And now he was here, standing on the ship's forecastle in the raging waves, gazing at the Isle of Storms with trepidation.

'Masthead lookout reports a cove just to the east, young sir,' Garond strode across the heaving deck with the ease of a lifetime at sea, despite the flurries of water being dashed across the pitching and rolling ship. 'I wouldn't say it was a safe harbour, but from what I've heard it's the best we're ever likely to get.'

'Very well, captain,' Tybalt answered, trying to keep his voice firm and confident despite his own doubts and the weariness of the journey in his bones. 'I shall begin to muster my men for the boats.'

It was with no small measure of understanding and sympathy that Tybalt watched the knights and commoners climbing out of the opened gratings from the ship's hold. Most looked at least as seasick as he felt. Some of them were thin and drawn, having obviously spent the last couple of weeks unable to keep the contents of their stomachs. The knights in particular had a haunted look, forced to share quarters with the peasantry, dreaming of open battle with the wind in their faces rather than cramped and smelly billets in the dark hold of a ship.

With much whinnying and clattering of hooves the horses were led out of the corrals Garond had constructed fore and aft of the mainmast. One hundred of the finest Bretonnian warhorses, two for every knight.

As the ship rounded the headland, Tybalt got his first look of Albion which wasn't rearing cliffs. As sailors scurried around him, furling the sail and bringing the ship into the wind ready to drop anchor, Tybalt looked at the wide shale beach. It was dreary and grey, the water-smoothed pebbles slicked with the hissing rain. There was no sign of plant nor animal and Tybalt felt his heart sink further. This was a dismal land indeed.

With much shouting and organised chaos, the crew let the anchor slip and the ship drifted for a while, settling into the wind eddies and currents. The *Brionne Breeze* had three boats, and it was a laborious process loading the horses into them. Blocks and rope were set up on the main yardarms and harnesses were rigged to swing the protesting destriers down the side of the ship, their eyes rolling with panic. Once in the boats they were tame enough though, despite the heaving waves. The ostlers moved among them, soothing the beasts with quiet words and gentle strokes. The knights were almost as truculent, arguing over who should be seated and where, who was most senior and should enter the boats last. Tired and exasperated, Tybalt had drawn his sword and bellowed at them to behave like men rather than children, much to the amusement of the sailors and peasants nearby.

There were too many men to be ferried over in one go, and the boats began to shuttle back and forth, oars rising ceaselessly, driving them across the foamy waters to the beach. It took several hours until Tybalt was at the top of the ladder ready to climb down with the last boatload. Garond was beside him, rubbing a hand over his stubbled chin.

'I cannot risk waiting inshore in this storm, I'll be driven into the lee cliffs,' Garond told him, pointing downwind to the east where Albion's characteristic white shores soared into the darkening skies.

'Yes, return in five days' time as we agreed, captain,' Tybalt replied. 'If we are not here for you then, we are either lost or dead.' He handed a letter to the captain. 'If I do not return, please pass this on to my father. He will see you are well paid.'

'What is it?' Garond asked, stuffing the letter inside his heavy coat. 'If you don't mind me asking, that is.'

Tybalt met Garond's kindly eye with a smile.

'It is my last wishes, should I not return to fair Bretonnia,' Tybalt told the captain.

'Aw, nonsense boy!' the old seadog replied heartily. He shook Tybalt's hand vigorously. 'I'll see you in five days time, with a dozen chests of gold, and a hundred lusty local maidens for me!'

'Only a hundred, Garond?' Tybalt laughed back.

'Well, I'm not getting younger and my wife wouldn't approve of more,' the captain joked back. He face then grew serious again. 'You do your family proud, young knight.'

Tybalt nodded in thanks and then swung himself over the gunwale onto the swaying rope ladder. On quivering legs he lowered himself down into the bobbing boat. With a final wave to Garond, he sat down, fixing his attention on his knees, trying to ignore the nauseating motion of the small craft. With a shout the boatswain got the sailors rowing, a steady tempo that drove them slowly but surely across the waves.

Hoarse cries and the sound of scrabbling in the boat broke Tybalt's reverie. The men in his boat were gathering at the front, and he stood and pushed his way through them. Ahead, he saw what the commotion was about. The craft in front had capsized in the violent swell, tipping knights, horses and

commoners into the sea. The boatswain was bellowing at the sailors to row fast, and all around Tybalt the other knights were shouting encouragement, jostling with each other to see.

'Sit yourselves down!' Tybalt cried out over the storm. 'You'll have us over as well with your rushing around.' He forced them back to their seats, pushing and shoving them away. Turning his attention back to the other boat, he strained his eyes through the rain for signs of life. A few knights clung to the upturned boat, desperately fighting against the weight of their armour. Sailors and peasants splashed around in the waves, the surf tossing them about and ducking them under the surface. Several horses were swimming for the shore, even their powerful muscles straining to fight against the tide.

'Pull, you dregs, pull!' Tybalt yelled back at the oarsmen. As he watched, Tybalt saw one of the knights' grip fail, and he slid off the boat. He thrashed around for only a moment before disappearing beneath the waves. Several more minutes had passed before the powerful strokes of the sailors brought them alongside the capsized craft, and Tybalt joined the others helping the survivors aboard, pulling them soaking wet from the raging waves. The few who still lived lay dejectedly in the bottom of the boat, gasping for breath, their weary bodies sprawled against the planking.

Among them, Tybalt was relieved to see Uriens, his father's cousin and oldest of the knights in the force. Tybalt knelt beside him and patted him on the shoulder. The veteran warrior met his gaze with a sorrowful look.

'Your expedition has not started well, Tybalt,' the old knight told him.

'It has not,' Tybalt agreed, his spirit full of foreboding.



'THIS IS A cursed land,' Uriens growled as he rode beside Tybalt. The young knight had to agree. They had set off from the beach only to find themselves marching and riding across dank fens. The rain had been ceaseless,

working its way into Tybalt's armour so that he was soaked, his undergarments chafing his skin. The going was difficult; the horses slithered and stumbled in the muddy bog; there seemed to be no sign of a road or track to follow. Thorny bushes and thin grass sprouted from the fens, trapping hooves and feet alike. Stunted, twisted trees were all that broke the flat, rain-drenched marsh, and the air was thick with the stench of rotting vegetation. Tybalt couldn't see far in the pouring rain, it was almost as if he was the only one there, accompanied by vague shadows. As they trudged on through the relentless downpour his heart was heavy.

Doubt began to creep into Tybalt's heart. What was he doing here, far from hearth and home? Was this a fool's quest? He had no idea what he was supposed to do now. Who was he here to fight? Where were they? Men had already lost their lives, and for what? Perhaps it had been no more than a fanciful dream, perhaps the duke had not come to him but he had imagined it in that moment on the cusp of sleep and wakefulness. Had he led these men here for nothing? Would more of them die here, in this Lady-forsaken land because of his rashness?

With these heavy thoughts weighing him down, Tybalt called a halt to the march, realising that the sun set earlier in these northern lands. It was a wet, muddy affair to erect the tents and pavilions. A driving wind blew up just before nightfall and the pegs could find no purchase in the soft earth, so that the growing gale flattened tents and unloosed the picketed horses. Tybalt strode back and forth across camp, resolving one problem after another, bellowing at the squires to work faster, urging, cajoling and threatening all in his path until everything was sorted to his satisfaction.

No fire would catch, there was not a single stick of dry wood to burn. Weary and depressed, Tybalt sat down to a meal of cold meat, cheese and bread, the chill seeping into his bones, his pavilion lit by a single small oil wick that sputtered and stank. Uriens joined him, gnawing the last pieces of flesh from a bone.

'This is no way to fight a war, Tybalt,' the old campaigner complained, tossing the remnants of his meal out of the flap into the

darkness. 'Tired men and horses, no warmth in their bellies, no firm ground for a good charge.'

'I am sorry, old friend,' Tybalt apologised, looking at the worn, wrinkled face of Uriens. Streaks of grey now marked the knight's black hair and short beard, and his brow was creased in a heavy scowl. 'I have brought you all to this miserable place, and now I am not sure why.'

'Well, young Tybalt, don't worry overmuch,' Uriens advised him, his lips forming a wry smile that deepened the lines under his eyes. 'We've set foot on Albion, lad! That's worthwhile in itself. This place is a legend, and we'll be part of that legend in the future.'

'I fear the legends may have exaggerated the truth somewhat,' Tybalt answered after a little while. He walked over to his pack and opened it, delving inside for some dry clothes to change into. 'For all the tales of many-headed monsters and plants that walk, and through all the stories of treasure troves and golden roads, I don't recall anything about the constant rain, the endless mud and the biting cold.'

'Tis the way of legends, that's for sure,' Uriens said, nodding in agreement. 'But as one who has heard a few tales about himself, I can tell you for nothing that all of the legends miss out the blood, the sweat and the pain. I've heard stories of battles I thought were splendid until I realised I was there and would never have guessed from the things the minstrels were singing.'

Tybalt stripped off and climbed gratefully into his clean leggings and a thick woollen shirt. He was so very tired, every joint ached and weariness cramped every muscle.

'Should we just head back to the coast tomorrow, and wait for Captain Garond?' asked Tybalt, needing advice from the seasoned knight. He was at a loss himself, and hoped his friend would perhaps have some thoughts or plan to help.

'Well, I think one day's a litt-' Uriens stopped as the sound of a commotion outside caught the attention of them both. Tybalt strode to the door flaps and stuck his head out, part of his mind cursing getting his new clothes wet.

Three of his knights hurried through the darkness, with them was a fourth man. Despite the bitter wind and driving rain,

the stranger was almost naked, with only a loincloth protecting him from the elements. In the dim light, Tybalt could make out the stranger's tall, muscular frame. As they approached, he saw that the newcomer had a massive shock of hair, straightened to thick points with lime giving him a fierce appearance. It reminded Tybalt of pictures he had seen of the Bretonni, the tribesmen who had founded Bretonnia so many centuries ago. The stranger was calm and didn't struggle as Leon and Melour led him through the rain, followed by Lafien who was carrying some kind of staff or spear.

'He walked into the camp, milord,' Leon told Tybalt as they stopped outside the tent. The stranger met Tybalt's inquisitive gaze with a smile.

'I am Charl, I have waited for Tybalt,' the stranger spoke Bretonnian with a heavy, guttural accent.

'Silence, cur,' snarled Melour, tightening his grip on Charl's arm. 'Speak when you are spoken to.'

'He was carrying this weapon, milord,' Lafien reported, stepping forward and proffering the object he carried. It was, as Tybalt had already noted, a staff tipped with a blade. Various feathers and bones were hung from it and along its length the wood was inscribed with various lines that criss-crossed one another.

'Bring him in,' Tybalt told the knights, stepping back into the pavilion. They ushered their prisoner inside.

'You are from duke,' Charl said suddenly, and Tybalt blinked in surprise. He glanced at the four other knights who were looking at the stranger with hostility.

'Leave him with me,' Tybalt told them, regaining his composure and plucking the staff from a startled Lafien.

'He may be dangerous, milord,' protested Leon, releasing his grip and stepping forward. Uriens looked sharply at Tybalt for a moment, and the young knight met his gaze equally. With a sharp nod, Uriens turned to the others.

'You have heard our lord's commands. Come with me,' he snapped. Leon, Lafien and Melour hesitated for a few moments more before reluctantly stepping away and ducking out of the pavilion.

When he was sure they were out of earshot, Tybalt turned to the strange man who was stood gazing curiously around the inside of the pavilion. There was something peculiar about the man, stranger even than his outlandish appearance. It wasn't until he had studied Charl for a few moments that Tybalt realised what was amiss. Charl was dry. Not a single drop of water could be seen on him, and it was then that Tybalt also realised the man's feet and legs were clean, despite having walked across the muddy field they were camped in.

'What manner of creature are you?' demanded Tybalt, stepping back in shock.

'I told, I am Charl,' the man replied evenly. 'I am what outlanders call a Truthsayer.'

'Who is this duke you mentioned?' Tybalt asked cautiously, deciding to try a different line of questioning.

'You don't know?' Charl replied, confusion written across his face. 'I am correct, you are Tybalt knight?'

'My name is Tybalt, but I still don't know who you are,' Tybalt countered, eyes narrowed with suspicion. 'What are you doing in my camp?'

'I came to find Tybalt,' the Truthsayer answered. He took a step forward, wringing his hands as if worried. 'Land told me a brave warrior would come, sent by duke.'

'The land told you?' Tybalt's curiosity was overcoming his caution. For all Charl's fierce appearance, he had an open, honest face and radiated sincerity.

'In casting of stones, yes,' Charl told him, sitting down cross-legged on the rug-strewn floor. He opened a pouch on his belt, pulling out a handful of small stones inscribed with similar symbols to those on the staff and held them out in his open palm. 'You are here to fight. Did not duke say this?'

'I am the warrior you are seeking,' Tybalt admitted after a moment's thought, rubbing a hand through his damp hair. 'But I don't know who I am here to battle.'

Charl smiled then, a contented expression, and carefully placing his rune stones back in their bag. He closed his eyes and sat for a short while in silence, obviously gathering his thoughts.

'I am not sure if all words I know are enough to explain,' he started apologetically. 'I only learn it from hearing you on your travel. A man, from your lands, has come here to serve Dark Master. One of his emissaries has offered him treasure to fight for Dark Master.'

'A Bretonnian, like me?' Tybalt asked in surprise, sitting down opposite the Truthsayer. As he grew more accustomed to the man's appearance, Tybalt noticed other details about him. Upon his chest he wore an amulet engraved with a three-armed symbol, something he had seen on some of the earliest graves in Bretonnia. The knight couldn't judge his age, he seemed strong and young, but about his face were faint wrinkles, and his eyes contained a look of wisdom that only comes with the passing of many years.

'Yes, like you,' Charl nodded vigorously. 'With many men and horses, he has come to fight for Dark Master.'

'Who is this Dark Master you mention?' Tybalt inquired, standing again and moving to the small travel table on which his wine bottle and goblets were set. Laying down the staff which he had almost forgotten he was carrying, he poured out two measures and took one to Charl. The Truthsayer looked at it for a moment before taking it. He sniffed it suspiciously before taking a sip.

'Grog!' he exclaimed with a broad smile before gulping the wine down in one long draught. 'Ag ugro grog!'

'What?' laughed Tybalt, almost dropping his own goblet. Charl looked up in surprise and then his smile disappeared.

'Sorry, don't know words,' he apologised, handing back the cup. 'This good drink.'

'We call it "wine",' Tybalt told the Truthsayer, sitting down again. 'You were going to tell me about who I am here to fight,' he prompted.

'Dark Master arrive and land dies, he must be beaten,' Charl explained simply. 'He bring more men to fight, but we have few men to fight. We must bring more men to fight his men. Duke sent you to fight your man.'

'How far away is this enemy of ours?' Tybalt asked, wondering if he would be able to make it back to the coast before Garond stranded him on this forsaken, strange island.

'He arrive many days ago, but you will fight him next day,' Charl replied with a confident nod of the head.

'He is close by?' Tybalt sputtered, suddenly alarmed that an enemy army could be only a few miles away.

'No, he far away, but we fight him tomorrow.' Charl held up a placating hand. 'I take you to him. I rest now for next day's journey.'

Tybalt was about to quiz the Truthsayer some more, but realised that he had already closed his eyes, and his breathing had slowed. Charl had obviously dropped into an instant slumber.

With a chill in his bones and a sense of foreboding about the morrow, Tybalt took far longer to find sleep that night.



WHEN TYBALT awoke, Charl was nowhere to be seen. As he washed himself in a bowl of nearly frozen water, Tybalt wondered if he had imagined the whole encounter. His mind wandering, he thought that perhaps this whole enterprise was just some strange dream, from the moment he had seen the duke again to now. His doubts were shattered when the door flap slapped open and Charl strode in as large as life, leaning on his odd staff.

'Way is prepared, march now,' the Albion native told Tybalt, gesturing with a nod towards the pavilion entrance.

'But the men have not had breakfast yet. I can't ask them to march on empty stomachs,' Tybalt protested, aware of his own hunger.

'Better travel in morning mist, harder later,' argued Charl, his expression showing that he would not hear any dispute.

'I will issue the order to ready for march,' Tybalt sighed, drying his hands on a linen towel, which he dropped to the floor before walking to the tent flap and bellowing for Uriens.



THE KNIGHTS were bedraggled and grumbling as they reined their mounts into column for the march ahead. Behind them, the peasantry seemed in no better spirits, having already started the preparations for the morning meal which they were then told had to be abandoned. Despite the surly looks and complaining, no one had openly questioned Tybalt's decision to set off so early. The boggy field in which they had camped was swathed in a thick mist, the watery light of the early sun barely able to penetrate it. At least it wasn't raining, the knight thought sourly, although the fog did equally well when it came to soaking him to the skin.

'Too wide,' Charl told him bluntly, as Tybalt stood at the head of the column, the reins of his horse in his hands.

'What's too wide?' blurted Tybalt, turning to follow the Truthsayer's gaze. The knights were arrayed in standard column, five wide with a lance's length between them. 'If we bunch up we'll be vulnerable to an attack.'

'Path narrow, two horses only,' Charl insisted, crossing his arms. Again, Tybalt noticed that not a droplet of moisture had settled on the native's body.

'Two horses?' the young knight asked in exasperation. 'If we are attacked, we'll be swept away before we can muster.'

'Follow me, no attackers,' Charl assured him, his face set.

Sighing, Tybalt bellowed the order to form up two wide. The knights exchanged glances, and it wasn't until Uriens echoed the cry from the other end of the column that they began to slowly arrange themselves into the new formation. When all was orderly again, Tybalt pulled himself into his saddle.

'Where to?' he asked Charl, who was stood where he had been all the while the army had been making its preparations, as if rooted to the spot.

'Follow me. No straying. Follow the light,' Charl said mysteriously.

'What light?' Tybalt asked, and was answered by the tip of Charl's staff bursting into a bright glow that seemed to push back the dense mist. There was a suspicious murmuring along the length of the column at this display of sorcerous power. Tybalt turned his horse around to face his force.

'The way ahead is treacherous!' he called out to them, hand raised above his head to draw the attention of the furthest soldiers. 'This man is our guide in these strange lands, and he is my ally! You must follow the man in front exactly!'

'Must not stray,' Charl agreed from behind Tybalt.

'Do not waver from the route at all, for any reason!' Tybalt added for the benefit of the others. There were nods and dipped lances of acknowledgement. Confident that his orders were clear, Tybalt turned his horse back to the direction of march and nodded to Charl. The Truthsayer set off with long, quick strides, and Tybalt kicked his spurs into his mount to follow before the mist swallowed up the light of Charl's staff. He heard the jingling of harnesses as the others fell in behind him.



TO TYBALT, it seemed that they had been marching for perhaps an hour, maybe a little more. Ahead of him, Charl was almost swallowed by the thickening fog, only the will o' wisp of his glowing staff could be clearly seen. The footing was better beneath the horses' hooves and Tybalt wondered if this was due to the ground itself firming up further inland, or whether Charl was leading them along some pathway they had failed to find the day before. Another thought entered Tybalt's mind: the way that the Truthsayer seemed entirely unaffected by this island's harsh elements. Perhaps the trail wasn't there yesterday, and wouldn't exist after they had passed.

The steady thud of horses hooves, muffled by the mist, was the only sound Tybalt had heard since they had set off. There had been no birdcalls; the land was eerily silent. The knight would have sworn it was devoid of life, so still was the air, so deep was the quiet.

It was a short while later that Tybalt noticed they were approaching something in the fog. Darker shadows loomed out of the blanket of vapours, towering over the mounted knight. A sudden panic struck Tybalt: He had heard tales of the giants of

Albion, of how they fed on human flesh and tossed rocks at passing ships to sink them. His hand strayed to his sword, but at that moment he saw the light from Charl, still progressing steadily forward. Looking up as he rode on, Tybalt realised that the imposing dark shapes were in fact gigantic standing stones, many times the height of a man. He was passing between two of them, almost as if entering a gateway. To the left and right, other stones could be dimly seen, forming a rough circle.

‘Do not stray!’ Charl’s voice called hauntingly from the fog ahead.

Tybalt glanced over his shoulder to ensure his knights were following in double file. They were still there, their mood subdued. Tybalt was not surprised, this was a dismal place to fight a battle. Normally there would have been joking and songs. Some of the older knights would have told stories from battles of their youth to pass the tedium of the march. Here the fog isolated everyone, reducing friends-at-arms to nothing more than shadowy wraiths drifting on the edge of vision.

Tybalt sensed a change around him. Glancing to his left and right, he realised he couldn’t recall passing back out of the stone circle and wasn’t sure how much time had passed since they had set off now. He wondered if perhaps he had dozed off in the saddle, weary from the previous day’s exertions and lack of sleep. The fog seemed even thicker, the glow from Charl’s staff barely discernible a few yards ahead of him.

It was then that Tybalt realised what had changed. There was sound. To his left and right, he could hear shuffling and growling. Drawing his sword, he tried to pierce the gloom with his eyes to locate the source of the noises, but could see nothing.

‘Follow the path exactly,’ Charl called out from ahead, and Tybalt echoed the command further down the line.

A sudden howling from the right caused a commotion behind Tybalt. He called to Charl and reined his horse around, trotting back down the line. He had passed a dozen knights when something came speeding at him out of the mists. It was a pack pony, eyes rolling with terror, bolting away from the howling, which had been joined by other voices – roars and growls that sounded from every direction. The pony

veered to one side to avoid Tybalt’s steed and disappeared into the fog. A handful of commoners came running after the stray beast, and seeing the direction of Tybalt’s gaze headed out into the cloudy gloom.

‘No!’ bellowed Tybalt, as they passed out of sight. The howling increased and was cut off but the shrieks of men in agony, the sound of snapping bones and horrid, slavering noises as of a great beast drinking from a pool. Some of the knights had gathered about Tybalt, Uriens and Leon amongst them.

‘We’ll slay the creatures, milord!’ Leon promised hotly, pulling his horse towards the sound of the continued growling and rumbling.

‘Stay where you are!’ Tybalt snapped sharply, kicking his own mount forward and grabbing Leon’s reins with his sword hand. ‘You’ll suffer the same fate if you vanish into these mists.’

‘This place is accursed!’ declared Abrion, one of Urien’s four sons. ‘We should turn back.’

‘No way back, only forward,’ Charl told them, appearing suddenly from the dim shadows.

‘Where have you brought us?’ Uriens demanded, dismounting in front of the Truthsayer. ‘Have you led us into a trap?’

Charl ignored him, turning on his heel and walking on once more. His voice floated back through the mists, strangely reassuring to Tybalt.

‘Follow. Do not stray from path.’



PERHAPS ANOTHER hour, maybe two, had passed when Tybalt saw more standing stones. They were approaching from inside the circle, though the knight could not remember entering the ring of menhirs. He was tense and stiff. Since the attack, whatever monsters that lurked in the mists had trailed them, unseen predators that could be felt and heard but were never seen. Deep-throated snarls had dogged the Bretonnians’ every step, and both the knights and peasants were ill at ease and nervous. Tybalt could not blame

them, his own nerves were ragged. Not only had the march been harrowing in the extreme, he knew he would have to fight a battle at the end of it, if what Charl had said the day before was true. And why wouldn't it be he thought? He calls himself a Truthsayer, after all.

The fog thinned rapidly after leaving the circle of monoliths, and soon Tybalt could see that they were riding down a high hillside. The sun was low in the sky, barely visible through the ever-present clouds which, for the moment at least, seemed to have emptied themselves of rain. The young knight tried to work out what time of day it was. It was still early morning by his judgement, but if that was the case, then they were somehow heading south, judging from the dim sun's position. But that couldn't be true. They had set off just after daybreak and had ridden for three, maybe four hours. It was with only a small amount of surprise that Tybalt came to the conclusion that they were still heading northwards and that the sun was not still rising in the east, it was setting in the west. Somehow, their journey had taken all day.

'There is foe.' Charl stood to Tybalt's right and pointed across the valley. On the opposite hillside, the fog was also thinning, moving down into the vale, and revealed a small village of tents, their bright pennants flapping slightly in a growing wind. Judging by the size of the encampment Tybalt estimated that his enemy's force was roughly twice as large. And by the looks of things, they were fresh rather than having marched all day.

'I will wait and attack tomorrow,' Tybalt told the Truthsayer. 'We are all weary.'

'Fight today,' Charl replied sincerely. It was not a demand, not a request, but a statement of fact.

'I will not attack today,' Tybalt argued back with a scowl. 'Only a fool would fight with darkness approaching and a tired army.'

'Choice not yours,' Charl countered, directing Tybalt's attention back across the valley. The knight followed the gesture and his heart sank. He could see the enemy army clearly forming up at the edge of the camp. They had been spotted and the alarm raised. There would be no choice but to fight. Uriens rode up, and Tybalt glanced

around him, seeing with satisfaction that the veteran campaigner had used his initiative to form the men into a battleline, now that they were obviously clear of the perils they had passed through in the fog. Uriens looked across to the other hillside, leaning forward on the pommel of his saddle.

'We should send the squires to find a defensible position, Tybalt,' the old knight told him. 'Force them to attack and then sally forth and strike at their heart. Their numbers won't count so much that way.'

'They have more archers, I suspect,' Tybalt countered. 'They could outshoot us and then charge us down at their leisure.'

'Why in the Lady's name does he want to fight today?' asked Uriens, his gaze not having moved from the enemy camp. Tybalt directed his attention back to the Truthsayer.

'Charl, what is the ground in the valley like?' he asked.

'Like all Albion: wet,' the Truthsayer replied with a sudden grin. 'There solid, rest unsure.' Charl pointed towards a rise in the valley roughly equidistant between the two assembling forces. Tybalt looked back at Uriens, who nodded.

'We'll attack them there, force them into a narrow frontage while the marshes protect our flanks,' Tybalt confirmed. 'Get the men ready, archers to the east, while I find out who we face.' Tybalt kicked his heels into his steed's flanks and the horse began to walk down the hillside, Charl easily keeping pace alongside with his powerful stride.



TYBALT WAITED patiently near the centre of the hillock, watching his foe riding slowly down to meet him, another person on foot with him. At their approach, Tybalt recognised the pennant fluttering from the knight's lance, a white hawk on a black background.

'Morlant. Why am I not surprised?' Tybalt called out, halting his adversary a dozen yards away. Morlant had an ill reputation at the king's court. He had inherited his lands and title a few years ago following his father's death during a hunt. A death that

many believed was not as accidental as it seemed. Tybalt noticed that the knight was wearing a bright suit of armour, chased along the breastplate and helm with gold filigrees.

'I see the role of mercenary suits you well,' Tybalt jeered.

'What are you doing here, young fool?' Morlant boomed out in his deep voice. He was a large, barrel-chested man with more than a little skill at arms. He had won his fair share of tourneys in the past, although of late he was held in poor favour by many across Bretonnia and had kept himself to himself.

'I think you should answer that question first,' countered Tybalt, nudging his horse a little closer. 'I think the king would object to you using his knights in this ill enterprise.'

'The king's knights?' laughed Morlant, his voice dripping with scorn. 'I serve someone much more powerful now.' Morlant's glance betrayed who this new master was. He was stood just behind the knight's horse, swathed head to foot in a black hood and tattered robe. What appeared to be antlers jutted from the folds of the hood, which Tybalt sincerely hoped were some form of decoration. The creature was hunched and twisted, leaning on a long shaft of bent wood, its tip pierced with a row of beast's fangs, each as long as a dagger. It was then that he noticed Charl was staring intently at the stranger, venom and hate in his gaze.

'Let's have no more of this. I challenge you to single combat!' Tybalt focussed his attention back on the other knight.

'Why, you upstart whelp...' Morlant began, pulling his sword free. The robe-swathed man took a few quick steps forward and laid a bony hand on Morlant's arm. The two exchanged whispers, and Tybalt couldn't help noticing how Morlant had to keep his horse on a tight rein as it tried to shy away from his sinister ally.

'This is nonsense, Tybalt,' Morlant finally cried out, having finished his argument with the man. 'I have the clear advantage. Go back home and I promise you safe passage.'

Tybalt ignored the parley, turning his horse around and kicking it into a walk. He rode slowly away with his back to Morlant, sure that the insult would not go unnoticed, for a knight who turned his back considered his enemy no threat.

THE PLAN WAS simple but effective, Tybalt thought. While his archers engaged the enemy peasants, he would lead his knights on a full charge against Morlant. They would strike him down and without his influence it was unlikely the rest of the army would fight on. His men were uneasy though, for if they could not gain victory in that one attack, they would be overwhelmed by Morlant's numbers.

'Speak to them, say something to stir their hearts,' Uriens advised him when he confided his doubts to the ageing warrior.

Tybalt spurred his horse into a gallop, riding out in front of his men so that all could see and hear him.

'I have asked much of you, these past weeks,' he called out, his voice strong and confident. 'We have endured much to reach this place. Now I must ask you for one more great effort. I know that I am but a boy to many of you. Some of you old warhorses saw battle before I was born. But I ask you this now. I ask you to fight with strength and courage. I ask you to fight with skill and honour. I ask you this, because you are Bretonnians, as am I. And our strength, our courage, our skill and our honour have been besmirched by the man we face. We fight not orcs, not the lackeys of Karl Franz, not raiders from the lands of Araby. We fight the worst enemy there is, our own kin. They have turned their backs on the King and the Lady, and have stained us all with their deed.'

'So today, I ask you to fight for glory, so that for generations to come, it might be said that a man of true heart and duty will always triumph over the man with darkness in his spirit. And if I, a mere strip of a lad, can know these things, surely you, bravest of Bretonnia, most excellent examples of knighthood, know it to. On my command, charge forth and right the wrongs these men have done to your names!'

'That'll do it,' murmured Uriens with a smile as Tybalt rode back. 'Don't keep them hanging on now, lad, get going!'

'For the Lady, for Bretonnia and for the King!' bellowed Tybalt, slamming his visor shut and ramming his heels into his horse so that the stallion sprang forward with a magnificent leap. With a hearty cheer and the thunder of hooves, the rest of the knights followed.

As he galloped across the soft earth, Tybalt was pleased to see some disarray in Morlant's line as the knights suddenly found themselves on the defensive. Glancing over his shoulder, Tybalt saw that his men had formed into a wedge behind him, so that he was the point of the lance. To his right rode Uriens, with Leon to the left, behind them the most accomplished fighters, so that they might break through the enemy and allow the less experienced and capable to fight on even terms with their foes. Tybalt felt himself grinning inside his helmet. His heart thundered against his chest and his breathing came in ragged gasps. The exhilarating feeling threatened to sweep him away; the weight of his lance as he dipped it to full tilt; the powerful bunching and releasing of the horse's muscles beneath him; the small, focussed view of his enemy through the visor, narrowing his world to just him and them.

Morlant had barely assembled his battle line when Tybalt and his knights crashed into it. Tybalt guided his lance into the chest of a knight with a green and yellow quartered surcoat, easily knocking aside his shield with a twist of the lance and driving the man from his saddle with the clatter of buckling armour. Swinging his horse to the left, Tybalt dipped his lance beneath that of another knight whose white shield bore the device of three griffons rampant. The point of his weapon drove through the knight's thigh and wrenched him screaming from his horse before snapping in two. Tybalt hurled the shattered butt into the face of another foe and drew his sword.

The ring of steel on steel surrounded the young knight as he hacked and swept left and right with his sword, parrying a lance tip to his left before backhanding the blade across the helmet of a knight to his right. Not far away Tybalt could make out Morlant's black banner, and headed towards it, smashing his way through the intervening fighters. Morlant too had spied Tybalt and was furiously urging his horse on, battering through the press of warriors with a heavy mace, bellowing an unintelligible battle cry with every bludgeoning strike.

Suddenly a fierce pain gripped Tybalt's chest and his mind filled with panic. With a gurgled cry, he pitched backwards from his saddle, twisting his ankle as his foot caught in the left stirrup. Agony like white-hot shards seared through his heart and lungs as he pulled his sprained foot free and lay on the ground, writhing, clutching at his chest trying to pull off his breastplate which threatened to crush the life from him. Writhing on the muddied ground, the stench of blood and sweat strong in his nostrils, Tybalt felt as if he were sinking, being pulled down into the stinking earth. He struggled to free himself, lashing out blindly with his sword before a spasm in his fingers flung the weapon away. Through tear-filled eyes he caught a glimpse of Morlant smashing his way through the knights who had formed a circle around their leader. Between the legs of one horse, he caught sight of the robed man, who stood with a clawed hand outstretched towards Tybalt.

Almost as suddenly as it had come, the pain and panic subsided, replaced with a sense of warmth and comfort that seemed to well up from the ground beneath him. It swiftly flowed through his arms and legs, soothed the roaring in his chest and brought strength back to his tired muscles. He closed his eyes, letting the power surge through him. He felt strong hands on his arm and opened his eyes to find Charl pulling him to his feet.

At that moment Morlant burst through the ring of knights, driving Lafien back with a powerful sweep of his mace. The knight's white charger pounded towards Tybalt and the Truthsayer, and Tybalt cursed as he caught a glimpse of his sword lying in the trampled grass a few feet away. Morlant hauled on his reins and leaned forward, swinging his mace down in an arc at head height, but Tybalt reacted quickly, pushing Charl to the ground and ducking beneath the blow. As Morlant struggled to arrest his headlong charge, Tybalt leapt up, wrapping his arms around the other knight's chest. With a grunt, Tybalt swung his legs forward and his upper body back, using his weight to rip Morlant's grasp free of the reins and sending them both crashing into the puddled ground with a splash of muddy droplets.

Tybalt was the quicker to recover, diving across to grab his sword before rolling to his feet. Morlant made an effort to stand, but Tybalt's steel-shod foot crashed into the side of his helm and sent him slamming back down again. Tybalt lowered the point of his sword to Morlant's throat.

'I yield!' begged Morlant, ripping off his helm, eyes fixed to Tybalt's murderous stare.

'Call off your men,' demanded Tybalt, the sword rock steady in his hand.

Morlant nodded and opened his mouth to call out, but gagged and choked before he could say a word. As Tybalt stepped back in surprise, the knight grabbed his throat. His skin began to blacken and veins stood out across his face, threatening to burst. His skin withered and cracked before Tybalt's eyes, flaking away and dropping into the mud. Within seconds all that was left was a withered husk and a drifting stench that made bile rise to Tybalt's throat.

'Dark Master's servant running!' Charl shouted, pointing through the ongoing melee. Tybalt saw the black-swathed man fleeing with a lopsided gait, his strange staff clutched across his chest. Vaulting into the saddle of Morlant's horse, Tybalt hauled the beast around and spurred it hard, forcing his way through his own men as they battled on with Morlant's followers.

Morlant's ally was fleeing towards the hillside, but his short strides were no match for the powerful gallop of a horse and Tybalt was chasing him down easily. Without warning, the sorcerer turned and pointed his staff towards the charging knight. Again, Tybalt felt searing pain through his chest and limbs and gritted his teeth against the spell with a gasped yell. The enchantment threatened to unhorse him, and his vision blurred as he swayed in the saddle. He was aware of a shrill cry and his horse stumbling, pitching him to the ground once more. As he lay there dazed, the pain began to subside and as he forced himself to his feet, he saw the Dark Master's emissary. The evil wizard lay in a flurry of hoofprints, his chest crushed as Morlant's horse had ran straight over him, smashing his ribs and crushing his vital organs. Just to be sure, Tybalt reversed his sword and drove it two-handed down

through the folds of the long hood. Wrenching it free, he began to stagger back towards the battle.



MORLANT'S followers had fought on for a while longer before surrendering. Without the presence of their lord and the vile influence of his sorcerous ally, they soon lost the will to fight. Tybalt stood in Morlant's camp with Charl and Uriens.

'Many thanks, Tybalt knight,' Charl said, gripping his arm wrist-to-wrist in a warrior's handshake.

'I am pleased to do my duty,' Tybalt replied modestly. 'Just make sure you get us back to the coast within three days,' he added with a smile. Charl looked crestfallen.

'You leave so soon?' he asked, sighing heavily. 'Much fighting to be done still.'

'Morlant is dead, his army broken,' Tybalt replied. 'I have done what I was sent here to do.'

'Have you, Tybalt?' asked Uriens, scratching at his chin. 'Can you be so sure?'

'Still much evil here,' Charl persisted, his eyes gazing into Tybalt's as if gauging his soul. 'Still need brave warriors to defeat Dark Master.'

'Dark Master, eh?' Tybalt repeated, chewing on his lip as he thought. He took a deep breath and looked around him, gazing over the hills of Albion, once more under a shower of constant rain. It was a dreary, dismal place, unlike southern Bretonnia where his father's castle was built. He hadn't seen the sun in a bright sky for over a month and longed to go home. He looked again at Charl, this strange warrior-wizard of Albion with the strong frame and reassuring voice. From what he could tell, there were others like him, fighting to protect their homes and people from the evil growing in the north. And here he was, with an army at his command.

'Do you not want glory and renown, Tybalt?' he dimly heard Uriens ask as his gaze turned to the north.

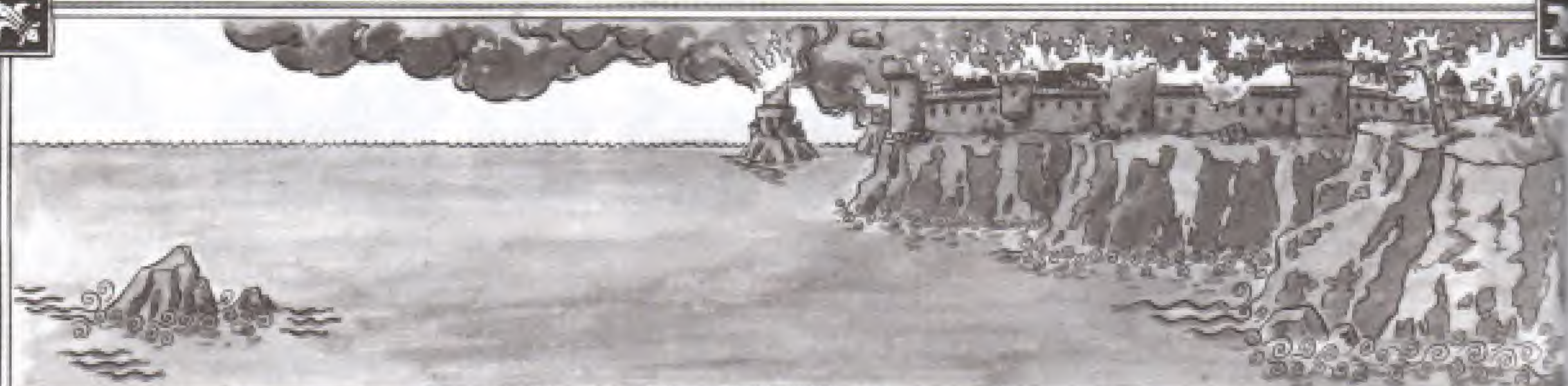
'Yes,' Tybalt agreed. 'Yes, I do.' 🐉

The Monster and the Maid

A Bretonnian Chronicle



PART TWO



Lord Kharan the Despoiler had lived up to the expectations of his chosen name. His fleet had disgorged its foul host upon the northern shores of Bretonnia, whereupon the mighty port of L'Anguille had been reduced to a blackened pile of smouldering rubble.

In response King Henri had dispatched an army under his champion Sir Maurice. The valiant but foolhardy knight had subsequently attacked the more numerous forces of Chaos across disadvantageous terrain. The ensuing slaughter rightly spawned the name of the Battle of Lamentations.

The keening voices of widows echoed off the stone walls of the grand city of Couronne. Their wails mixed with the anguished cries of the refugees who were pouring in from the countryside, fleeing the advancing evil horde like the prow wave surging in front of a huge sea serpent. A dread serpent whose coils quickly encircled the city, and locked it tight in a fateful embrace.

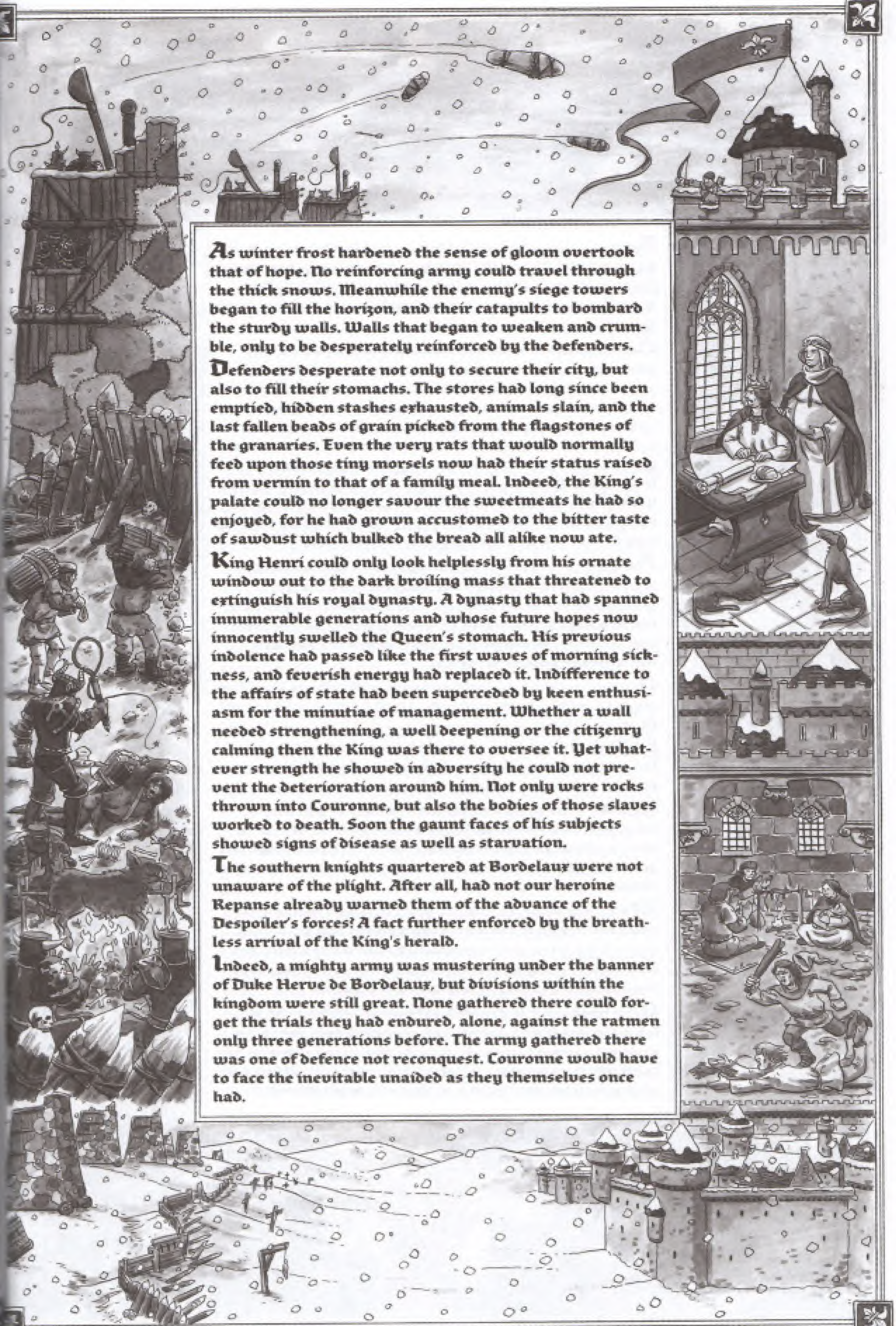
The beleaguered garrison could only look on forlornly as Lord Kharan's forces laid the capital of Bretonnia under siege. Whilst the peasantry had been drawn into the defenders' ranks the knights who had fallen on the field of battle could not be replaced. The city's myriad high walls prevented an easy assault but there was no option of a breakout either.

The first fleeting flakes of winter snow began to fall and with it the besiegers began the frenetic activity associated with the forthcoming destruction they clearly intended to wreak. Those too slow to escape the evil force's advance had been enslaved, and now laboured to dig entrenchments, fell trees and shape weapons of war. Whips and kicks ensured their continuing collaboration or signalled their abysmal deaths.

The midwinter solstice passed and with it hope seemed to ebb from the hearts of those trapped within the city's perimeter. For no news had arrived from the south. The King's heralds had been dispatched with an urgent cry for aid, but none knew whether it had fallen on deaf ears.

In direct proportion to the rate at which the city's swollen population depleted Couronne's ample granaries so too did the rumours grow. Rumours of both coming salvation and impending doom in equal measure.





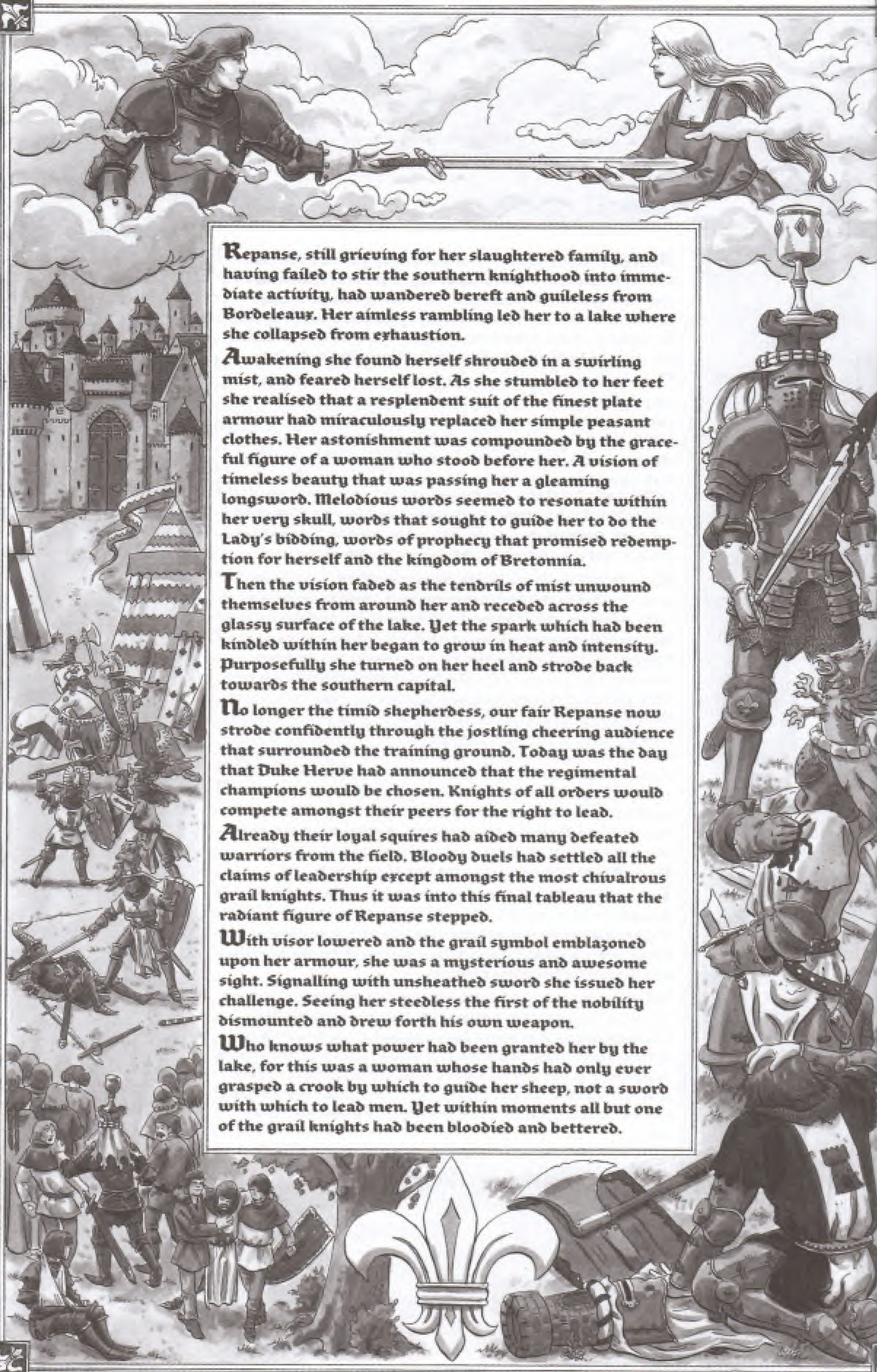
As winter frost hardened the sense of gloom overtook that of hope. No reinforcing army could travel through the thick snows. Meanwhile the enemy's siege towers began to fill the horizon, and their catapults to bombard the sturdy walls. Walls that began to weaken and crumble, only to be desperately reinforced by the defenders.

Defenders desperate not only to secure their city, but also to fill their stomachs. The stores had long since been emptied, hidden stashes exhausted, animals slain, and the last fallen beads of grain picked from the flagstones of the granaries. Even the very rats that would normally feed upon those tiny morsels now had their status raised from vermin to that of a family meal. Indeed, the King's palate could no longer savour the sweetmeats he had so enjoyed, for he had grown accustomed to the bitter taste of sawdust which bulked the bread all alike now ate.

King Henri could only look helplessly from his ornate window out to the dark broiling mass that threatened to extinguish his royal dynasty. A dynasty that had spanned innumerable generations and whose future hopes now innocently swelled the Queen's stomach. His previous indolence had passed like the first waves of morning sickness, and feverish energy had replaced it. Indifference to the affairs of state had been superceded by keen enthusiasm for the minutiae of management. Whether a wall needed strengthening, a well deepening or the citizenry calming then the King was there to oversee it. Yet whatever strength he showed in adversity he could not prevent the deterioration around him. Not only were rocks thrown into Couronne, but also the bodies of those slaves worked to death. Soon the gaunt faces of his subjects showed signs of disease as well as starvation.

The southern knights quartered at Bordelaur were not unaware of the plight. After all, had not our heroine Repanse already warned them of the advance of the Despoiler's forces? A fact further enforced by the breathless arrival of the King's herald.

Indeed, a mighty army was mustering under the banner of Duke Herve de Bordelaur, but divisions within the kingdom were still great. None gathered there could forget the trials they had endured, alone, against the ratmen only three generations before. The army gathered there was one of defence not reconquest. Couronne would have to face the inevitable unaided as they themselves once had.



Repanse, still grieving for her slaughtered family, and having failed to stir the southern knighthood into immediate activity, had wandered bereft and guileless from Bordeleaux. Her aimless rambling led her to a lake where she collapsed from exhaustion.

Awakening she found herself shrouded in a swirling mist, and feared herself lost. As she stumbled to her feet she realised that a resplendent suit of the finest plate armour had miraculously replaced her simple peasant clothes. Her astonishment was compounded by the graceful figure of a woman who stood before her. A vision of timeless beauty that was passing her a gleaming longsword. Melodious words seemed to resonate within her very skull, words that sought to guide her to do the Lady's bidding, words of prophecy that promised redemption for herself and the kingdom of Bretonnia.

Then the vision faded as the tendrils of mist unwound themselves from around her and receded across the glassy surface of the lake. Yet the spark which had been kindled within her began to grow in heat and intensity. Purposefully she turned on her heel and strode back towards the southern capital.

No longer the timid shepherdess, our fair Repanse now strode confidently through the jostling cheering audience that surrounded the training ground. Today was the day that Duke Herve had announced that the regimental champions would be chosen. Knights of all orders would compete amongst their peers for the right to lead.

Already their loyal squires had aided many defeated warriors from the field. Bloody duels had settled all the claims of leadership except amongst the most chivalrous grail knights. Thus it was into this final tableau that the radiant figure of Repanse stepped.

With visor lowered and the grail symbol emblazoned upon her armour, she was a mysterious and awesome sight. Signalling with unsheathed sword she issued her challenge. Seeing her steedless the first of the nobility dismounted and drew forth his own weapon.

Who knows what power had been granted her by the lake, for this was a woman whose hands had only ever grasped a crook by which to guide her sheep, not a sword with which to lead men. Yet within moments all but one of the grail knights had been bloodied and bettered.



Renaud le Loup de Carcassonne was her last opponen., the strongest and wiliest knight amongst that southern nobility. With measured gait he advanced and feigning a thrust converted the blow into an upward slash. It was a manoeuvre that had previously disembowelled many an opponent, but not this one. Seemingly without Repanse's guiding her sword shifted shimmering sideways, parried the blow and converted defence into attack. Renaud crumpled under the force of the blow against his helm. In an instant the blessed longsword's point was at the base of his mailed throat.

The astonishment of Renaud's sudden defeat was quickly overwhelmed by the feelings evoked when Repanse removed her helm. As her girlish locks fell freely across her shoulders bewilderment revealed itself upon the faces of the onlooking spectators. Of all who claim to be witnesses to the scene, none can truthfully recount what words issued forth from our heroine's mouth, but all say that a greater spirit touched them. Something profound moved their hearts and souls leading to a great onrush of emotion which resulted in wild, delirious cheering. Duke Herve flung himself in prostration before her and all the knights followed suit.

Daybreak of the next day saw a vast host leave the city of Bordeleaux. A vengeful force led by a shepherdess carrying a grail banner. I doubt whether such a swift march has ever been witnessed. Bastonne, Mousillon, Artois, Gisoreux: all passed rapidly underfoot as the last traces of snow receded with the coming of spring. In each dukedom men joined the ranks unprompted by their lords and masters until the ranks were swollen fourfold. A predominantly peasant flock led by a simple shepherdess.

Yet if hopeful elation were the norm within those ranks the opposite was true within Couronne. Irreparable breaches had pierced the city's walls and on a fine spring day the mighty war towers, battering rams and mantlets were pushed forward as ladder carrying troops surged past them. The long expected assault had finally begun. The skeletal disease-ridden Bretonnians bowed their heads and prayed fervently to Our Lady of the Lake for salvation and mercy in the next world, for surely their suffering in this was about to end.



THE BATTLE

The whole Chaos army surged forward in one awesome movement: even the cavalry had dismounted to better assault Couronne's walls. Firstly the harpies swooped down on the battlements, but most were plucked off by the diligent archers (1). Yet the manoeuvre allowed the foot troops to close with the walls as the catapults engaged in a deadly duel (2) for supremacy. The barricaded breaches (3) focused the battle into several deadly melees for entry into the city. Fights in which the plucky defenders managed to hold their own only with the aid of rushed reinforcements. Reinforcements which were drawn from the Couronne battlements, and thus enabled the Chaos troops to gain footholds atop the walls (4). Couronne's fate appeared sealed for the rams too





were now seriously weakening the gates. Then, dreamlike, a mighty host appeared behind the Chaos horde. A huge mob of men-at-arms overwhelmed the enemy's rear, decimating the chariots and dragon-ogres held in reserve (5). Whilst a single lance comprising every knight surged through Lord Kharan's bodyguard to reach the warlord. Startled 'The Despoiler' turned to face his foe. As sunlight glinted off Repanse's sword he was momentarily blinded, and struck down in that instant (6). Cruelly, so too was our heroine by one of his foul henchmen. Yet the tide had dramatically turned. The main gate was flung open and King Henri led a final counter attack from within the city (7). The battle was won for Bretonnia.





Renaud le Loup cradled the dying Repanse in his arms as Duke Herve held her hand and wept openly for the loss of their inimitable leader and figurehead. They appeared frozen within this scene of grief as around them the rest of the Bretonnian army chased the routed leaderless Chaos forces from the field.

Working in unity both northern and southern forces pursued the smashed enemy across the devastated kingdom. Those devoted to the Dark Gods had nowhere to flee and were hunted down like wild boar and slaughtered at bay within the woods and fields of our fair land.

Lord Kharan's body was strung from Couronne's highest battlement to rot within sight of his vanquishers. The Despoiler's host had come very close to destroying the Kingdom of Bretonnia, a nation whose own divisions and complacency very nearly led to its destruction. It was only through the miraculous intervention of Our Lady who recognised the true spirit of our people in the form of a humble shepherdess that we were able to find redemption and salvation.

A grand mausoleum was constructed for Repanse on the hilltop where she slew her enemy and was herself slain. A dominating feature which overlooked both our capital Couronne and the road which leads southwards. A symbol of reconciliation between the dukedoms and a reminder of the divisive paths we had trod in the past.

Pilgrims from all over the countryside came to show their last respects as our saviour was laid inside her crypt whilst a solemn ceremony was conducted. A ceremony during which King Henri posthumously knighted Repanse and all the knights of the realm pledged obedience to her spirit and memory.

This difficult period had seen a dramatic change in King Henri's demeanour. The indifferent indolence of his reign had been swept aside during the siege of Couronne and the energy he displayed then was maintained during the reconstruction after the war had ended. Thus it was a truly joyous crowd that gathered beneath the palace balcony to cheer the arrival of an heir to the kingdom.

As King Henri raised his son high to be seen by the onlookers he spoke loudly and clear of the duties of the monarchy. Duties of service to his subjects and his country. Then he pledged that he would truly reunite the kingdom so that all future generations of Bretonnia may inherit a land worthy of our Lady. A pledge inspired by Repanse's noble sacrifice and whose chivalric values still resonate today. ✦





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A Fool's Bargain

By Brian Maycock

ALFREDO LANDI Naddeo was in an especially good mood today. And why not? His shop was crammed to the rafters with wonderful goods just waiting to be sold, and the first customer of the day had just walked in.

'You want to buy armour?' Alfredo greeted the customer in a loud, hearty voice. 'You want to buy an army? Then you've come to the right place, my friend, for I can supply both at a very reasonable price.'

It was one greeting among many in his merchant's repertoire that Alfredo used. He might also have asked the customer if he wanted to buy the secret of eternal life, a ring that gave its wearer the power to prophesise the future, or the way to a wench's heart.

Alfredo Landi Naddeo would try and sell anything to anybody, whether he had the goods to hand or not, whether the goods even existed, or not.

But to this customer – who was a thin, nervous-looking young man – Alfredo had decided to begin by promoting the wares of warfare.

The customer eyed Alfredo warily before replying, 'I'm only looking.'

'Looking!' Alfredo bellowed. 'Looking is no good. I can't make a living from looking.' And then, seeing that he had startled the customer and the man was starting to back out of the shop, Alfredo tried to calm him with a friendly smile. Unfortunately, he only had three teeth left in his head, all decayed stumps, and the smile had the opposite effect to that intended, and the customer started to run towards the exit.

But Alfredo was not a man to give up on a sale so easily. He motioned with a portly hand, and a broad, sub-human figure contained in the shadows by the door slammed it shut.

The customer's route out of the shop was blocked.

'So sorry about that,' said Alfredo, 'but we're closed now.'

'But... but,' the customer stammered, 'I can't leave.' Sweat flowed freely as blood from a gaping wound down his face.

Alfredo leant back in his chair. Wood creaked in distress. 'In that case,' he said, 'you might as well buy something.' There was no good humour in his voice now.

'I... I don't have much money.'

'Neither do I, my friend. I am but a humble merchant attempting to scrape a living in this harsh world. So, will you not help ease my suffering, and buy something.'

The man hesitated. He sensed that if he did not leave this shop having made a purchase he would not be leaving it alive. He asked, 'What do you have?'

Alfredo's smile returned – the customer shivered – and Alfredo replied, 'What don't I have?'



VON NEUMANN stamped his boots on the filthy cobblestones. Damn it, it was cold! And now he was losing the feeling in his feet. That his boots were riddled with holes did not help, nor that he had not eaten for three days.

A less proud man would have been reduced to begging by the misfortunes that Bernd von Neumann had suffered these last five years. Quest after quest had ended in disaster, with death, shipwreck, and brother adventurers at each other's throats, which would have been fine by von Neumann had he returned to his adopted home of Tilea with a fine bounty in his pocket.

But there had been none.

The only things he had brought home had been new diseases.

He buried his hands in the rents in his trousers that had become pockets and hurried on.



ALFREDO HAD DESPATCHED the man from his shop wearing a garish, flea-ridden hat and cape, the price for which had – conveniently – been exactly the same as all the money the man had had in his possession. Alfredo chuckled and dropped a handful of dull coins into his strong box. It lay permanently open on the floor at his feet, and though it had been a long time since he had been able to see down there due to his expansive stomach, thinking about it always cheered him.

He now only rarely left his chair behind the counter, and coins had spilt out enveloping his feet. He felt like he was rooted in money and the more money he added the greater he would become.

Not that he could get much greater or he would have to have the counter moved back to accommodate the glorious layers of his belly.

Yes. Life was good. It was a fact of life that merchants such as he had to move on a lot. Indeed, he had left his last establishment in a furious hurry, many years ago, when he had been thin enough to hurry. In those days, he had a young assistant, Mercy Orientale, a good-natured lad, but basically useless as merchant material due to an honest streak in his character. Alfredo had been trying without success to instruct Mercy in the art of never charging a fair price when he had glimpsed out of a rare clean spot in the shop window an approaching mob. It was made up of ex-customers of Alfredo's. Dissatisfied ex-customers. Thinking on his feet Alfredo told Mercy to watch the shop while he went out back to relieve himself.

His bladder had not been full, and even had it been he would not have paused to empty it until he was a safe distance from the shop, and the mob. He did, though,

spare a moment to glance back and saw that his shop was in flames, as was Mercy's head as he was carried off by the mob, an impromptu torch.

Alfredo laughed at the memory, which sent a pain shooting through his gut. He held his sides until the pain had subsided.

He had no plans to ever move on again. In this city of rogues and intrigue, he had found his ideal spot. Most of his customers did not live long enough to come back and complain, and if they did, he set his bodyguards on them.

And that was always the end of the matter.



IT WAS NOT right that a man such as he should be reduced to this. Living like a vagabond. But one day, surely, his luck must change.

Von Neumann turned into Piacanca Plaza. It was in reality a narrow alley. What looked like raw sewerage plastered the blackened stone walls which lined the plaza, and the only other visible feature was a door.

Scrawled above it was a name: *Alfredo's*.

Von Neumann exhaled, a long, tired breath that froze before it reached the end of his nose.

He had overheard two drunks talking about Alfredo's in the street that very morning. They had said it was a place of marvels, that from it you could buy talismans and ancient documents stolen from the gods, and men, both living and dead.

In Alfredo's, they had slurred, you could buy anything you desired.

Once upon a time von Neumann would have scoffed at such claims. But now he was a desperate man, ready to listen. Ready to latch onto the faintest hope.

He pushed open the door to Alfredo's and stepped inside. In here would he find what he needed to put the flesh back on his skeletal ambitions?

Would he be able to buy the luck which for so long had been denied him?

IT WAS A cavern, crammed with goods. The light was poor, the air was thick with dust, and von Neumann imagined that were he to linger too long in this place his throat would become clogged and he would choke. The ceiling was low, and hanging from it were hundreds of ornate helmets, many displaying puncture marks that he doubted any wearer could have survived. Also, every inch of wall and most of the floor was covered with wares. There were vicious looking axes, their edges serrated teeth ready to bite. There were parchments, cauldrons, caskets, gowns, pikes and pantaloons. Skulls, leg bones, pickled limbs in jars, pickled things in jars. Not things that had ever been human or taken from a human – he hoped. Von Neumann was also disturbed to see that some of the items for sale seemed to be moving. Claws flickered into sight near his feet, and a grime-coated necklace was pulled down, under the layer of wares. He tried to see where it had gone, what exactly had taken it, but his eyes were drawn to a corner of the room where sat, propped against the wall, a man. Who was not a man, von Neumann realised.

The creature opened its eyes, slowly; there was an audible cracking. It opened its mouth, was trying to speak, but unless words could be formed from the flies that buzzed out it would not succeed.

Von Neumann turned away. A zombie.

So it was true then, he thought, this place did have dead men for sale. And, if that was the case, perhaps everything else the drunks had said was true also.

I must find out if that is the case, he decided. There were a number of makeshift paths between the covering of wares and he stepped forward, towards the counter and the silent figure who sat behind it.

The merchant was obese, bald save for a few long strands of ginger hair which stuck out at every angle from his pate. Even in the gloom, von Neumann could see that the merchant's skin was yellow. He also gave out a noticeable odour. It was as disgusting as it was remarkable.

That any customers lingered long enough to buy was a testament to the worth of the goods on sale, von Neumann decided as he came up to the counter.

The merchant raised a rotund arm, pointed at him and said, 'Is it armour, or an army, my friend? Is that what you seek? An army that needs such as you to make it complete?'

Von Neumann nodded. Even in these dark days he was still recognisable as a fighting man. That was a good sign.

He cleared his throat and straightened his back.

'Not at present, sir,' he said. 'My name is Bernd von Neumann. I am a sword for hire, but before I commence my next commission I have other tasks to complete first.'

'Other tasks that need tools to complete?' the merchant queried.

'You are a wise man.'

'What wisdom I possess I use to try and help my customers. And this day, am I right in thinking that you seek a weapon?'

Von Neumann feigned indifference. He would never admit that he had no clear idea of just what it was he wanted.

'Possibly,' he said.

'Possibly,' echoed the merchant, and amongst the debris that littered his counter he lifted a sword from out of a brown sack. 'Behold,' he said. 'The sword of Lord Mobach.'

'I have never heard of him.'

'His legend has been shared only amongst a select few.'

'And this is his sword.'

'Yes.' The merchant held out the sword.

Von Neumann took it, turned the sword and examined it. It looked nothing special. The metal was flawed, chipped; also it was too heavy and had no balance.

He was not impressed and returned his attention to the merchant.

Like a sage about to proclaim a universal truth Alfredo clasped his hands and said, 'It is a magic sword.'

'Magic,' von Neumann echoed, suddenly very interested indeed. A great sword that could be used to hack all who stood in his way to death was very useful. A magic sword that allowed him to sweep aside any who stood in his way with the ease that magic gave... Von Neumann's heart started to race with excitement at the prospect.

He said, 'Magic, you say.'

'I do say, good sir,' Alfredo replied – and the watery lumps that were his eyes glinted.



ALFREDO KNEW THERE was no magic in this sword. He had bought it three days previously off a bedraggled traveller who had come to his shop. And it was the traveller who had told Alfredo that it was the magic sword of Lord Mobach.

The fool! Thinking he could impress Alfredo with such an obviously false tale, and so persuade him to pay an inflated price for a piece of junk.

Alfredo had listened patiently, then paid the man a pittance and had him ejected from the premises.

Well, although there was no way he, Alfredo, would be duped by such nonsense, this soldier of fortune so clearly fallen on hard times was a different matter.

Alfredo could have sold him a device to make more holes in his already riddled clothes if he had chosen.

Which was an idea, but first things first.

'Yes, magic,' Alfredo said, and repeated the remainder of what the traveller had told him.

'The sword you hold will not harm any man who speaks the truth, and, as a bonus, will bring a life of virtue to whomsoever owns it.'

'Can such a thing be true?' gasped von Neumann.

Alfredo had to restrain himself from grinning too broadly at the reaction he had caused.

He had himself a sale!



HE HAD TO have this sword. He had to! Von Neumann had a little saved, a few coins that he had gone without food and shelter and dignity to preserve.

Now, he threw them all onto the counter.

Like a pig snuffling, the merchant rummaged through them, counting them. Then he threw them onto the floor.

Thinking that this meant their transaction was completed von Neumann hefted the sword and turned to leave.

'It is not enough,' said the merchant.

Von Neumann paused. 'Pardon?'

'The price of this sword is thrice the coinage you offered.'

'But you took my money.'

'It is a start, but it is not an ending.'

Noxious, arrogant fool, thought von Neumann. Squatting there behind his filthy counter in his filthy shop, and speaking to him, the sellsword, von Neumann, like that. Too many people had, over these last few years. Too many scum who were not fit to lick the mould off his boots.

Well, he had the magical sword of Lord Mobach now. He would take no more grief off low fools.

He said, 'You took my money, and that is the ending. The sword is mine and I am going to leave with it, do not try and stop me.'

'I will try, and I will succeed,' Alfredo said. 'I and my loyal servants.'

Three bulky figures stepped into view for the first time.

Bodyguards, von Neumann knew. All merchants kept them close and this one was no different.

He would deal with them after he had dealt with the bloated master.

'You wish more for the sword,' he said.

'I do,' Alfredo answered.

'Have this then,' von Neumann said and thrust the sword into the merchant's thick neck. It passed in up to its hilt in one satisfying go.

Von Neumann took a deep breath and started to pull it free. The bodyguards would be slow, dim-witted creatures, but, now he had killed their master so brutally, they would be on him in moments and he had to defend himself.

The sword finally slipped loose of its fat, gristly sheath, and he spared a moment to glance into the dead eyes of the merchant.

Which returned the look, which were far from dead. Which were just as alive as they had been before von Neumann had plunged the sword in.

The sword had not killed the merchant. Von Neumann was dumbfounded, frozen to the spot.



ALFREDO WAS NOT so affected. He roared with anger, tore the sword from his attacker's rigid grasp and sliced open the mercenary's throat. Blood showered from the wound and von Neumann's legs collapsed and he toppled backwards.

On his neck the sword had performed as a sword should.

Von Neumann was dead.

Alfredo returned the sword to its sack, then wrapped it further in a leaf of paper advertised as torn from an ancient and most forbidden book of necromancy. His hands were shaking but he ignored them.

So now he knew, the traveller who had brought the sword to the shop had not been lying when he had said it was magic.

And so neither had Alfredo when he had told the hired sword the same thing.

Alfredo had been telling the truth, unwittingly, but telling the truth nonetheless. And because he had been, the magic of the sword had prevented him from being harmed when the mercenary had plunged it into his neck.

Alfredo touched the point on his skin where the sword had entered. It was not even scratched. Magic indeed, he thought. He clicked his fingers. His bodyguards lumbered forward. He handed them the sword and said, 'Take this. Take it a long way away from the shop. I don't care what you do with it, but I never want to see it again.'

The bodyguards grunted. This was a simple enough instruction for them to follow, and they turned and slowly made their way out of the shop with the sword.

Alone, Alfredo sighed in relief. Other men might want to possess this sword, but he wanted nothing to do with it.

It wasn't that the sword was magic that bothered him. And he didn't care about the fact that the sword would not harm any man who spoke the truth.

It was the other thing the sword brought to its owner that bothered him.

'The sword you hold will not harm any man who speaks the truth, and, as a bonus will bring a life of virtue to whomsoever owns it.'

Alfredo felt a chill pass through his body.

A life of virtue. That would be the end of him.

He would never make another sale. He would have to close the shop.

'But, it's never going to happen,' he told himself, reassuring himself.

Just as long as he never saw that accursed sword again. ☹

NEXT ISSUE

Riotous new fiction from:

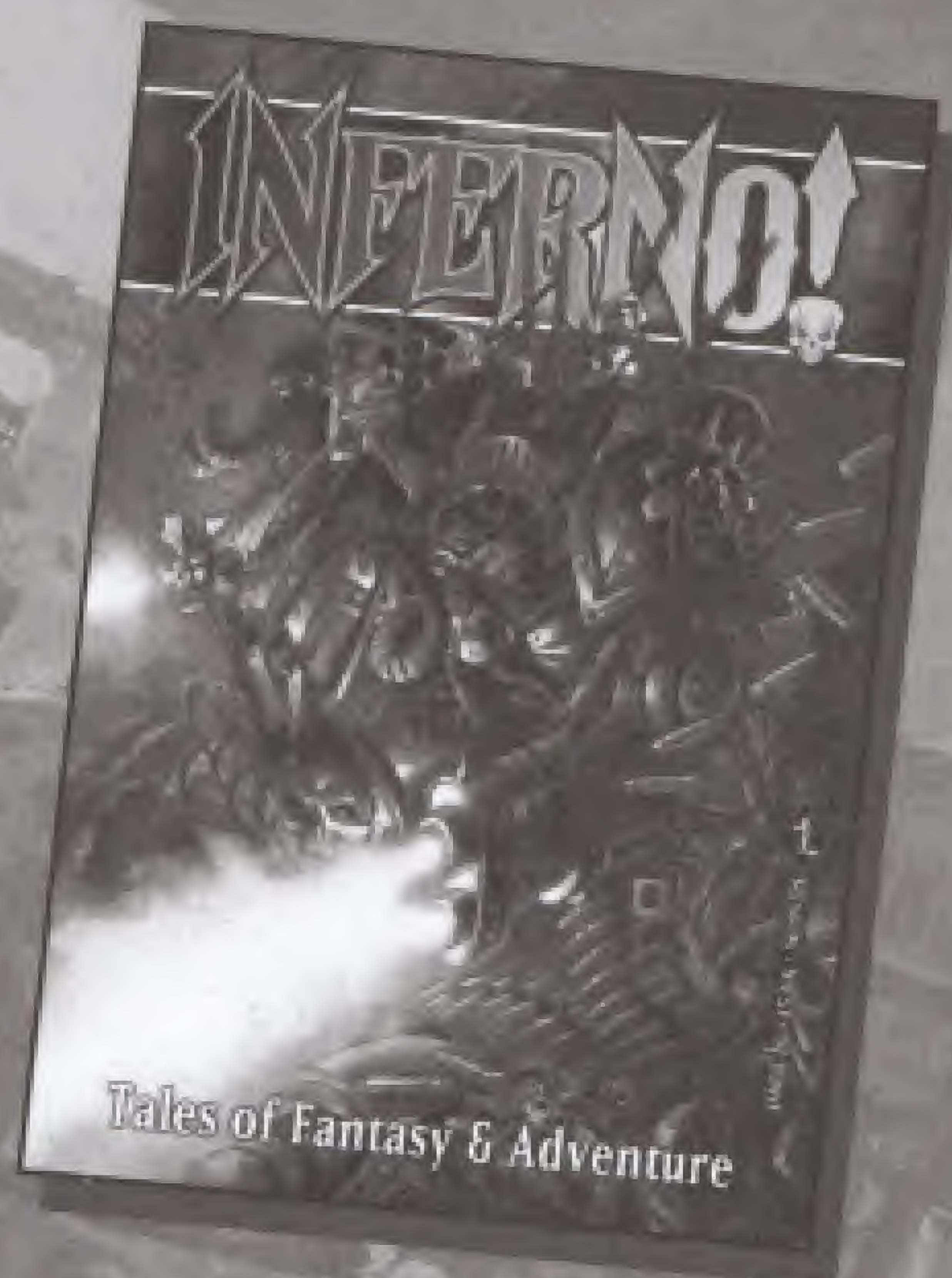
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THE *TEN-TAILED CAT* IN TALABHEIM, KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE CITY AS A GATHERING PLACE FOR *RACONTEURS* AND THE TELLERS OF TALL TALES.

SCRIPT: MITCHEL SCANLON
ART: ANDREW HEPWORTH

THEY COME TO THE *TEN-TAILED CAT* FOR MANY REASONS. SOME TO BOAST OF THEIR EXPLOITS, SOME TO AMUSE AND ENTERTAIN, OTHERS TO UNBURDEN THEIR SOULS OR PASS ON DIRE WARNINGS...

TALES FROM THE *TEN-TAILED CAT* The Tale of the Bear

WHILE SOME COME IN SEARCH OF *WONDER*.

A SMALL BOY, WITH NO MORE THAN TEN SUMMERS BEHIND HIM, HIS YOUTHFUL CURIOSITY ENFLAMED BY THE SIGHT OF A CIRCUS WAGON STANDING OUTSIDE A DOCKSIDE TAVERN.

AND SO HE WENT INSIDE, IN THE HOPE OF FINDING MARVELS AND MIRACLES AND *MAGIC* WAITING WITHIN.

NOT TO SEEM LIKE I'M PUTTING ON *AIRS*, MY FRIENDS, BUT WHEN IT COMES TO THE TELLING OF TALES WE CIRCUS FOLK KNOW A THING OR TWO.

AND, TO PROVE THAT'S NO *IDLE* BOAST, I'VE A TALE TO SHIVER YOUR BLOOD. A TALE MADE ALL THE MORE REMARKABLE BECAUSE EVERY WORD OF IT IS *TRUE*.

SO, GATHER ROUND, MY FRIENDS...

...AND HEAR A TALE OF MORDHEIM, THE CITY OF THE DAMNED.

NOW, IN THOSE DAYS THERE LIVED A NORSEMAN BY THE NAME OF *ONE-EYED BRAKI*, THE LEADER OF A MUCH-FEARED WARBAND KNOWN AS *BRAKI'S MEN*.



HE HAD COME SOUTH TO MORDHEIM IN SEARCH OF FORTUNE AND GLORY, AND HAD SENT MANY A MAN TO HELL IN THE COURSE OF HIS QUEST.

BUT FOR MEN LIKE BRAKI, LIFE IS CHEAP, AND SO, WHEN ONE NIGHT HE WAS APPROACHED BY A FOPPISH MARIENBURGER WITH A MURDEROUS PROPOSITION -



- THE NORSEMAN WAS ALL-TOO-READY TO HEAR IT.

AND THIS SCHNEIDER - THIS MERCHANT - HAS BEEN HOARDING WYRDSTONE FOR MOST OF THE PAST YEAR, HOLDING OUT FOR THE HIGHEST PRICE,



HE'S MOVING IT TOMORROW. I KNOW THE TIME; THE PLACE; HOW MANY GUARDS; EVERYTHING. ALL I NEED NOW ARE MEN WITH THE STOMACH FOR SOME BLOODY WORK.



WELL, NORSEMAN, WHAT DO YOU SAY?

AYE, IT SOUNDS GOOD. BUT HOW CAN YOU BE SURE OF YOUR INFORMATION?



BECAUSE, MY BARBARIAN FRIEND, IT COMES FROM THE MOST IMPECCABLE OF SOURCES.



YOU SEE, I AM THE MERCHANT'S BODYGUARD.



AND SO IT WAS THAT THE NEXT DAY, AT A TIME AND PLACE OF MATTHAUS'S CHOOSING

- BRAKI'S MEN WENT TO *WAR*.



LATER, HAVING MADE *SHORT* WORK OF ITS GUARDIANS, THEY BEGAN TO INSPECT THEIR PRIZE. LITTLE REALISING MATTHAUS HAD ONE MORE CARD YET TO *PLAY*.



CAN YOU HEAR IT - A HUM IN THE BACK OF YOUR HEADS? ALMOST AS THOUGH THE STONES WERE *SINGING*...

IT IS NOT THE *WYRDSTONE* YOU CAN HEAR, MY FRIEND, BUT THE *RINGS* OF ALL THE *GOLD* IT IS WORTH -



- 'TIS PITY YOU WILL NOT BE AROUND TO HEAR THE *END* OF THE *SONG*.

ABOUT TIME, HEINRICH! FOR A MOMENT I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO HAVE TO KEEP THOSE OAFS IN POSITION *ALL* DAY.

NOW, STEP *LIVELY*, AND LOAD UP THE *GOODS* -



- THE *STREETS* OF THIS CITY ARE THICK WITH *THIEVES*.

AND SO, HAVING BETRAYED HIS EMPLOYER AND BRAKI BOTH, MATTHAUS MADE HASTE TO CLAIM HIS REWARD...

NO, NO, I HAVE NO *QUALMS* ABOUT YOUR PRICE. IT IS YOUR *DISCRETION*, OR RATHER LACK OF IT, THAT CONCERNS ME.

I DREAD TO THINK OF THE CONSEQUENCES SHOULD OUR DEALINGS TOGETHER BECOME *COMMON KNOWLEDGE*...

OH SWEET SIGMAR!
NOOO-SKREEESHHHH!!!

YOU NEED HAVE NO *FEAR* ON THAT ACCOUNT, MY FRIEND. ANY WHO MIGHT BETRAY US ARE DEAD.

SKREE-KRAWW!!!

IN THE LAST MOMENTS OF HIS LIFE, PERHAPS MATTHAUS REFLECTED ON HIS SINS - WHO CAN SAY?

PERHAPS THEN HE WOULD HAVE KNOWN BRAKI TO BE A MEMBER OF THE *URSBJORDINGS*, A NORSE TRIBE WITH THE GIFT OF THE *WERE* -

PERHAPS HE REFLECTED THAT IT IS ALWAYS *BEST* TO UNDERSTAND SOMETHING OF THE *NATURE* OF A MAN *BEFORE* YOU BETRAY HIM.

- WHOSE MIGHTIEST WARRIORS ARE CAPABLE OF ASSUMING *BEAR-SHAPE* IN BATTLE.

A FEAT THAT HAD *ELUDED* BRAKI -

SLEESH!!!

krnchh!

THE GUNS! GET THE G--AARGHH! DAMNATION!

NO

UNTIL RAGE AND THE POWER OF WYRDSTONE UNLEASHED THE POTENTIAL DORMANT WITHIN HIM.

NOOOO!!!



AND SO, HAVING GAINED VENGEANCE, BRAKI TURNED BACK INTO A MAN?

NO. THE CHANGES WROUGHT BY WYRDSTONE ARE NOT SO EASILY REVERSED.

WHATEVER WAS HUMAN IN BRAKI WAS LONG DEAD BY THEN, LEAVING HIM NO MORE THAN A BEAR, WITH BUT THE DIMMEST RECOLLECTIONS OF ITS TIME AS A MAN.



HAI! WITH BRAKI A BEAR, AND ALL THE OTHERS DEAD, WHO WAS THERE LEFT TO TELL THE TALE IN THE FIRST PLACE!

YOU MUST TAKE US TALABHEIMERS FOR FOOLS, TRAVELLER, TO TRY AND PASS OFF SUCH AN OBVIOUS FANCY AS FACT.



YOU SAID IT, MY FRIEND.

IT IS TIME I RETURNED TO THE ROAD, I THINK. PERHAPS IN THE NEXT TOWN I WILL FIND SOME WHO APPRECIATE A GOOD TALE A LITTLE MORE.



SIR! SIR!

I BELIEVE YOU, SIR - THOSE DRUNKARDS WOULDN'T KNOW A TRUE TALE IF IT JUMPED UP AND BIT 'EM.

BUT PLEASE, WHAT BECAME OF BRAKI?



BRAKI?

WHY, HE WENT TO THE WILDERNESS TO SEEK OUT OTHERS OF HIS KIND AND LIVED A LONG AND HAPPY LIFE.



OR AT LEAST, THAT IS WHAT I AM TOLD.

END



THE DEEP

by Bjurk Davidson

FIRST CAME THE explosion, then the screams. It all happened so quickly that Hundri could not be sure of the exact sequence of events. The deep-sea craft rocked violently and the dwarf was aware of searing heat on his face and flashes of light. Then came the screams and someone burst from the engine room, his entire body aflame. It was Garald, fire licking from his beard and flowing hair all around his face. White smoke poured from the dwarf's tunic, filling the passage around him. He waved his arms around, hitting himself as if to smother the flames, and then suddenly another blast rocked the submersible and Garald hit the deck. Hundri staggered backwards and stared at the dying dwarf, twitching on the ground.

Hundri shuddered and turned away from the horrific sight.

Through the porthole bubbles of air were rising rapidly. Occasionally he caught a glimpse of some bizarre sea creature, as it appeared to rise through the water. But Hundri knew that the fish were not rising to the surface. No; it was the craft that was descending, falling through the water like some metal barrel. He could hear the groans of the craft's walls as it sank down. He closed his eyes. He didn't want to see it. But it was no good, because though he could not see the water, he could feel its immensity around and above him. He could feel its power, like a solid weight, crushing down on the deep-sea craft like a vice. As they fell, the groans increased. Hundri could feel the vice closing, as if some giant were slowly turning the lever. He realised they were going to die, like Garald who lay in front of him, a smouldering carcass.

There was a great boom that shook the ship, Hundri fell backwards and everything slid towards him. The craft had hit the bottom.

Hundri lay there, the corpse next to him, horror in his heart, his head full of despair.

Suddenly he heard a thick and husky voice: 'Hundri, get yerself up, lad. Now's not the time to rest.' The voice shook Hundri from his despair. He looked up to see the blackened face of Thon staring at him. 'Get up, we've got to look for the others.'

How long had he been there? He couldn't be sure. Thon, who had been in the engine room, must have put the fire out. But who else was alive?

Thon helped Hundri up over Garald's scorched body. They headed into the engine room. It was blackened and burned, the pipes like the scarred insides of a great creature. There was no one else there. They turned around and headed into the front section of the craft. The sleeping quarters were deserted, but in the kitchen they found Gwin holding a bloodied rag against the head of Karel. Behind them sat Dunn, engineer and designer of the experimental dwarf submersible, holding his shoulder.

'We've got to stem the bleeding,' said Gwin.

Karel groaned in semi-consciousness, and moved his arms as if to fend off some creature attacking him in his delirium.

'I can do that,' said Hundri, 'let me get my things.'

'What happened?' asked Dunn.

'An explosion,' said Thon. 'Garald and I were in the engine room, stoking the fire, and there was this big explosion behind us.'

'From behind you?'

'Yes, behind us.'

'Not from the engine?'

'No.'

'Just as I thought,' said Dunn quietly. 'It's sabotage!'

THE SURVIVORS had gathered in the living quarters. There were six of them, huddled together in the wan light of the oil-lamp above, their beards and faces dark with soot, their eyes filled with fear.

'We're going to die down here, just as that madman prophesied,' Doirin said, his voice a high and steady whine that hurt Hundri's head. 'We all heard them and they were right. We should never have come; we shouldn't be here. Now we're doomed. This craft will never hold up.' Doirin looked up to the submersible's shell, as if he expected it to give way at any moment.

'If you don't shut up, I'll shut yer up myself,' said Karel quietly. The heavily muscled warrior pulled on his beard menacingly, as if he meant what he said. He was the only one who was not a member of the Engineers Guild. He had been passing through Luccini looking for mercenary work, and they had brought him along because they wanted someone who could handle himself in a pinch. Karel's axe hung ready by his side and now Hundri wondered whether it was a good idea to bring him along after all. The warrior had spent much of the journey brooding silently, broken only by brief bursts of petulance when the others had asked for his help. He was not here, he said, to perform menial tasks. He was here to fight, to face danger. The others could stoke the engines, shift the bags of coal and prepare the food. The wound to his head had obviously done nothing for his temper.

'We should have listened to the speaker on the docks,' said Doirin.

'Shut up,' Karel said.

Doirin had enraged the warrior, and in doing so had drawn their attention back to the launch of the expedition as the crowds had ringed the docks of Luccini, a panoply of colour. The scene flooded suddenly back into Hundri's mind. The sun shining on all the golds and reds, the sky blues and aquas, merchants and fishermen with feathers in their caps, the exotic animals from Araby congregated around the wharves, squawking and crowing, moving their long necks and stretching skinny legs. It had been a festival atmosphere, and the expedition had been heroes, at least for the day, to the inhabitants of Luccini. The crowds had applauded the

speeches, had wondered at the ingenuity of the sea-craft, with its clever designs of weights and air-pockets, its modern steam engine, the underwater suits and accompanying air-carts. There had been much eating and drinking, much singing and laughter. So no one was expecting what was to follow as the tall, hooded figure stood on the speakers platform, unannounced and a ringing voice shook over the crowd.

'Citizens of Luccini,' the speaker called and the deep-toned voice seemed to linger in the air silencing the assembled mass, 'the tablets of Akarzan were not meant for mortal eyes. Indeed the blasphemers of Thantis Tor, the priests who coveted the tablets, who sought to decipher their secrets, offended the Gods and paid the price for their arrogance. So too will this presumptuous expedition fail. For the guardians of Thantis Tor will never allow this band of brigands, this collection of tomb robbers to pillage its secrets. Some things are meant to be left undisturbed.'

Then the hooded figure turned to the members of the expedition and though Hundri could not see his eyes, he could feel the hatred and power emanating from beneath. By now the crowd was silent and even the animals on the wharves were stilled, as if they too could understand the speaker and were frightened by him. A cloud passed across the sun and a cold wind sprung up. The speaker's voice rang loud and menacing so that even those far from the docks could hear it, echoing through the streets of Luccini. 'So give up this foolery, turn away from looting, or be prepared to meet your watery death beneath the sea.'

And then, as quickly as he had arrived, he was gone.

A murmur ran through the crowd, and the expedition members felt suddenly downcast. Was there some curse now upon them? What indeed were the secrets of the fabled tablet that they were searching for? Had the Priests of Thantis Tor offended the Gods and had their temple been plunged into the sea as punishment aeons before?

These questions played in Hundri's mind as they had set out across the ocean in search of the hidden temple, and now they

arose again as the expedition members sat huddled together in the submersible, their own tomb set against the ocean floor.

'The temple guardians have taken their revenge,' Doirin said, shifting his slight frame uncomfortably.

'Shut yer mouth.' Karel's face had begun to turn red and the veins in his forehead were visibly bulging.

'And now we're going to die and there's nothing we can do about it.'

Karel was upon Doirin in an instant, his fists pummelling the smaller dwarf's face. Gwin trying to hold him back. Thon looking on dispassionately. Dunn scrambling away from the outburst of explosive violence.

'I warned you,' roared Karel, his eyes blazing. 'Look at him, he's not a real dwarf. Look at that thin beard, those skinny shoulders. He's got elf in him, I'll wager.'

Gwin pulled the warrior off Doirin and held him back.

'Stop it,' Gwin said. 'Calm down.'

There was suddenly quiet as Doirin wiped his bloody nose with his hand and scrambled away. Karel suddenly relaxed but the other dwarfs kept hold of him. The only audible sound was that of Dunn, giggling nervously in the corner.

'Dunn, are the engines damaged?' Old Thon spoke calmly. White patches of his beard could still be seen beneath the soot and grime. His voice and presence calmed Hundri. Thon had been on many expeditions: south across the seas to the strange southern lands, east into the mountains where ogres and trolls ruled abandoned dwarf strongholds. His face was weathered and scarred. I'll bet he's been in worse places than this, Hundri thought.

Dunn ceased his anxious laughter, as if he were suddenly brought back to reality from a far away place. He shook his head, to clear it, and then said, 'I'll have to look. Was anyone else apart from Garald there when the explosion occurred?'

'I was at the doorway,' Thon answered. 'But all I saw was a sudden burst of flames.'

'Come on, Doirin,' Dunn said, 'let's have a look.' Dunn had designed the craft. A master engineer, he knew its structural weaknesses, its capabilities, its systems of

buoyancy and the capacity of its steam engines. He had enlisted Doirin as his assistant, and together they had overseen the construction of the submersible, while the others had worked on the underwater-suits and carts.

Hundri, Thon, Gwin and Karel were left in the living quarters, listening to the groaning of the hull.

To take his mind from it, Hundri ran through the tale that Thon had told him on the first night of their voyage, the tale of the rise and fall of Thantis Tor.

Thantis Tor, he had said, was a fabled temple perched high upon a craggy island out to sea. For a thousand and more years it had stood impregnable to any army or navy. Its walls were built on sheer cliffs, its spires and towers, made from white marble, overlooked the surrounding sea. Its very impregnability made it a safe place for the storage of valuables: gold and jewels, precious carpets and spices brought from the south, masterworks of art from Estalia. Its storerooms were stocked full, it was said, with riches and wonders of the world.

And then, one day, the Tablets of Akarzan were brought from the south, and the priests of Thantis Tor were said to have acquired their greatest treasure. The fabled Tablets were brought from Araby perhaps, and some say they were stolen from holy places, where people worship different gods, or perhaps the same gods with different names.

The priests set about the task of learning the secrets of the Tablets. But one day a mighty storm thundered across the sky, and the clouds were said to have been so powerful as to suck water from the ocean before dumping it again in torrents. The seas ate away at the coast, the winds uprooted trees and sent them flying through the air like spears of some insane giant. People hid in basements or cellars and were still deafened by the wailing wind. And when people went looking for Thantis Tor they found nothing but ocean. Where it stood there was only the sea, lying calmly like a blanket over the sunken temple. Thantis Tor had disappeared beneath the waves.

HUNDRI SAT huddled in the corner of the storeroom. The other dwarfs were silhouettes in the darkness. Occasionally they stirred and he could make out a beard, or the white of an eye. The groaning of the hull had stopped for a moment, but Hundri could not help but think of the tremendous pressure that must be placed on the submersible. Not only from the surrounding water which might, in the end be quite manageable, but from the rocks that could be seen piled against the craft through the portholes.

The submersible had been a project of the entire – though admittedly tiny – Dwarf Engineers Guild in Luccini. The dwarf population had come west through the Border Princes from the great sea fortress of Barak Varr some two hundred years earlier. Immediately they had been isolated from the rest of their race, and the years bred factionalism and petty grudges. Like the ones that separated Doirin from Thon – some ancient family feud kept alive through the ages by ongoing disagreements. To Hundri it seemed futile, but to the others it had become their way of life. Hundri however had planned to leave Luccini and travel like Thon had. He hated the stifling atmosphere of the Guild and longed to see the great cities of the Empire to the north, or to return to his homeland in the east, or the venture into the exotic lands of Araby.

What he needed was money: something that would allow him to travel without undue hardship. So he had been recruited to the expedition to the submerged temple of Thantis Tor. Now he found himself trapped on the ocean bed perhaps never to return. He put his head in his hands and waited.

'Who do you think wishes us to fail?' Thon asked suddenly.

Gwin shrugged in the darkness. 'Who knows?'

'You should 'ave said something afore I took the job,' Karel said.

'What do you think it would be like?' Gwin asked. 'To die down here under the water, with crabs eating your eyes and fish laying eggs in your entrails?'

'You wouldn't know, you'd be dead.' Karel said, rubbing his bandaged head.

'They say there are ghosts though,' Gwin said leaning forward so that his flashing eyes could be seen in the dark, 'and I believe it. And if there's ghosts then maybe you could be a ghost down here. Maybe that's what the guardians are, the spirits of the dead, tormented, lost.'

The hull suddenly shuddered loudly and they all froze, as if any movement might bring the water rushing in. They sat in silence until eventually Dunn and Doirin returned from the engine room.

'I don't understand how the explosion happened,' Dunn said, and then stopped and cocked his head, as if listening to something. Hundri could only hear the soft humming of the ocean current as it washed over the hull.

They waited for Dunn to continue, but he didn't. He just stood and listened.

'Uh,' Doirin said, 'we can work on the damaged engine, but that's not the real problem. The problem is that rocks have pinned the craft to the ocean floor. We'll never free it. And if we can free it the craft will slip over the precipice and plunge to a depth where we'll be crushed.'

'How do you know we can't free it?' Thon demanded.

Doirin stood silent, well aware of Thon's antipathy for him.

'How do you know we'll plunge further?'

Hundri stepped forward: 'At least we can try. We'll have to send some of us out in the suits, of course.'

'Yes,' Gwin said. 'Karel will have to go. Hundri, you too.'

'And you, Gwin,' Thon said. 'You are quick-witted, and we'll need a good engineer out there. I'd go but I'm too old, too slow, and Dunn and Doirin have to stay here and work on the engines. Agreed?'

There was a general murmur of agreement.

'Dunn, do you agree with that, lad?' Thon looked at the designer of the craft.

The engineer's assistant stood motionless, head cocked, his eyes staring into space, as if at some far off point in the distance.

'Dunn?'

He remained transfixed.

'Dunn.' This time Thon spoke loudly, sharply.

Dunn turned his head slowly toward the others. 'Can you hear them?' he asked.

'Who?' Gwin's black eyebrows came together in a mixture of concern and curiosity.

'The voices.' Dunn said, 'the voices of the guardians. They're calling us.'



THE SUIT WAS immensely heavy and the massive helmet obscured Hundri's vision. He could only see straight ahead through the circular glass plate. To see to the side he was forced to turn his entire body.

He walked down the short ramp into the water, dragging the air-cart behind him until he stood next to Gwin. On the other side of Gwin, Karel's hulking body was squeezed into one of the suits. The hatch above them was closed and suddenly they were in darkness. Gwin meanwhile turned the wheel in front of him and the hatch on the outside of the submersible opened. Thin wan light penetrated the water around them and Gwin stepped out onto the sea floor.

Hundri followed. The sound of his breath was loud in his ears; it came fast and he realised that his heart was beating wildly. All it would take would be one malfunction of his air-cart, or the blockage of the hose that led from the cart to his helmet, and he would drown. He felt the unnaturalness of his situation in every pore of his body, in his heart and lungs. Go back, his mind screamed at him, save yourself. But he forced himself to follow Gwin's footsteps away from the submersible, out into the cold currents at the bottom of the ocean.

Thin rays of light like delicate cords struggled down to touch the sandy seabed, reminding Hundri of the world of sun and wind above. A world that seemed so far away now, a world he had almost given up hope of seeing again. He banished such thoughts from his mind and tried to concentrate on the task at hand.

To his left he was aware of the treacherous cliff, over which the side of the submersible jutted. He tried not to look at it, but found

himself mesmerised by the vista of Thantis Tor below. From where he stood he could see the peaks of the spires, pointing arrogantly towards the sea and sky above. There it lay: a ghostly temple that even now radiated with shattered arrogance. Even from this distance Hundri felt its magnetism. He turned away, afraid that he might suddenly leap over the precipice in some mad desperation to reach its fabled secrets, to walk along its grand halls, to fall upon his knees in its stately chapels.

Suddenly he felt compelled to turn back towards it and took another step. An arm grabbed his shoulder. He turned and Karel looked back at him, mouthing the words, *come back* through his visor. And just as he turned towards the submersible he fancied he saw figures, walking up the steps towards the temple far below. He looked again but they were gone.

The submersible was pinned beneath a pile of rocks that had tumbled from a smaller cliff just behind it, like some strange creature that had tried to escape from a rocky grave, only to make it halfway before its strength gave out. The smaller cliff ran at an angle away from the precipice behind Hundri. To his left a seaweed forest climbed twelve or more feet towards the sea's surface. It waved in the currents and fish of all shapes and sizes swam around its edges.

Already Gwin had begun to work at moving the rocks that pinned the submersible, aided only by the dull light from the craft's external lanterns, an ingenious invention of Doirin's devising. Although the lantern itself was airtight and hung on the exterior of the craft, a slender pipe connected it to the submersible's air supply allowing the flame to burn, albeit dimly. The job would take some time and Hundri set himself to work also. The sooner he was back inside the sea-craft the better. He could still hear Dunn's voice saying: 'Can you hear them? The voices of the guardians. They're calling us.'

It was backbreaking labour, lifting the rocks, shifting them aside. The suit itself was heavy, and the water was resistant to movement anyway. All the time the dwarfs had to be careful of the aircart behind them; to damage it would mean a watery death.

They worked and the light from above softly shifted from green to blue, a few shades darker. Perhaps the sun was setting. Gwin climbed onto the piles of rocks high above and began clearing them. Karel worked on the large heavy ones below. Hundri did what he could, shifting the ones that Gwin pushed down, or clearing the smaller ones around the base of the submersible away. Hundri lost all sense of how long they had worked for. He was lulled by the activity: the pressure of the water through the suit exhausting him, the constant shifting of rocks monotonous, his mind free to wander.

He found himself wondering who he could trust, who he could rely on. The expedition had begun with great excitement and a sense of unity. Now things were different. It was always under extreme conditions that one found out a person's true character, just what they were made of. Hundri had always associated with Thon's family's faction and thought it best to stay near the old dwarf. But what of the others? Karel seemed decent enough, but he was the last to join the expedition – a mercenary hired for a specific job. None really knew him. Dunn and Doirin were from another faction of the Guild and so Hundri had already been predisposed against them, and they against him. But also neither of them now inspired confidence. Doirin's whine was unnerving, his defeatism demoralising. Dunn's voice was disturbing in a different way.

That left Gwin with his raven black hair in long braids, his flashing eyes. Gwin had separated himself from the feuds of the Guild and had spent his time unearthing some of the ancient ruins that Luccini had been built upon, supposedly the remnants of an ancient elven sea-fort. He was much admired for his courage at attempting the endeavor, for the black-stoned ruins were eerie and legend had it that they predated the War of the Beard. Sometimes lights were said to float through the ruins and cries were said to echo through hidden subterranean passages. So Gwin was dependable, he had enough courage at least.

Hundri looked for him now, but Gwin had disappeared over the other side of the craft, and Karel was perched on top, heaving the great stones that held the craft down.

Hundri continued to work and to think, repressing his suspicions before they surfaced consciously in his mind. Time passed and the light continued to soften.

At first the movement seemed to be a trick of the light, a play of the water on the fronds of the seaweed, which now moved quickly like a legion of exotic dancers. But there seemed no increase in the current. Hundri glimpsed something dark and huge moving amongst the submarine forest. He froze. Was it his imagination, or was there indeed something out there, some great predator waiting to descend on them in an orgy of fury and violence? Hundri was afraid.

Unable to call to the others he waited and watched for the shape. But he saw nothing. After some time he returned to work, conscious now of his exposed back, of his lack of vision, all the time feeling that something or someone was watching him. His breath had again become loud in his ears, his heart pulsing like some great drum echoing in the distance.

Again he thought he saw something. Again he turned and the seaweed was disturbed. He watched again and waited.

He was pushed forward, as if by some sudden current, and he fell to his knees. He rolled himself over expecting to see some creature from the depths, some eight limbed horror, some tentacled monstrosity bearing down on him with razor fangs. But there was nothing except the disturbance of the sand behind him, perhaps picked up by the current and floating in the water in tiny whirlpools.

He turned back to work and some time later Gwin climbed over the rocks at the back of the submersible. Hundri looked at their work. The bulk of the rocks were gone. If the engine could be started the craft should be able to free itself. Gwin pointed towards the hatch in the hull, signalling for him to return to the craft.

Hundri was relieved to enter the submersible. Gwin followed. They waited for Karel.

He never returned.



A GAIN THEY gathered in the storeroom, sitting on the bags of coal, or on the floor. The submersible had three other rooms: a tiny kitchen, cramped sleeping quarters, the crippled engine room which also housed the controls and rudder.

'What do you mean he disappeared?' Thon put his arms on his hips aggressively.

'Gone,' was all that Hundri managed to say.

'I went back to look for him,' Gwin said, 'but he wasn't there. I assumed he'd come back already.'

There was silence in the room for a while.

'Last time I saw him, he was near you,' Gwin's flashing eyes looked at Hundri.

'Last time I saw him, he was closer to you,' Hundri replied.

For a minute no one said anything, but the air was rife with suspicion. 'I did think I saw something out there,' Hundri said in an effort to break the tension.

'What?' Doirin asked.

'I'm not sure, something moving.'

'How convenient,' Gwin said.

'Damn you,' Hundri's voice cracked as he raised it.

'Of course there was something moving,' said Dunn, who had until this moment been silent. 'The guardians are out there. And they're calling us; they're calling our names. Can you hear them? Even now I can hear them calling your name Hundri. Listen.'

Hundri shuddered.

'Be quiet, Dunn,' Gwin said.

'We're in their domain now,' Dunn said.

'We're not in anyone's domain,' Thon sat down suddenly against the wall. 'There are no guardians, there are no spirits. There was just an explosion, an accident. And if the submersible can be fixed, we can make it back to land. Or on to the temple, or wherever we want.'

'But we don't want that,' Dunn said and suddenly started laughing.

'Calm yourself, Dunn,' Thon said. 'You need to clear your mind.'

Dunn, still laughing disturbingly, stood up at this and headed into the living quarters.

'He speaks the truth though. We'll never escape. We may as well resign ourselves to death,' Doirin said.

'You've always been a coward,' Thon accused. 'You and your family.'

'My family? My family?' Doirin's nasal tones pierced the air. 'It was your great-great grandfather who stole the plans of the flying machine from mine. Deceit has always run in your blood, Thon.'

'My ancestors thieves? Why you no-good grobi-lover. It was my great-great grandfather who designed the machine. And he built in one fatal flaw, one fatal weakness, without the removal of which it would never work. It's not my fault that your ancestor died trying to fly it.'

'A fatal weakness?' Doirin laughed. 'Tell yourself what you need to keep the lies alive, Thon. We both know that your forebears were ever mendacious and sabotaged the great kite the night before it was flown. I wouldn't be surprised if you sabotaged this craft as well -'

'You, you,' Thon struggled for words and then took one step towards Doirin, who backed away. 'I'll...'

Doirin turned his back and spoke while walking away. 'I'm going to find Dunn. The engine needs more work.'

'Well,' said Thon, 'I'm going to look for Karel. Is anyone game to come with me?'

'We need rest,' Gwin said.

Hundri closed his eyes and realised that it had been countless hours since he had slept. How long he did not know.

'I'll go alone then,' Thon said and calmly turned to the ladder leading below to the suits, and the hatch outside.



BEFORE HUNDRI had shuffled to the sleeping quarters Thon drew him aside.

'How are you, lad?' the old dwarf asked.

Hundri nodded his head in affirmation.

'Well listen, stick near me, you hear? I'm going to find Karel, but when I'm back you stay near.' Thon put his hand on Hundri's shoulder.

Hundri nodded again. The two dwarfs stood facing each other for a moment. No more needed to be said.

Hundri retired to the cramped living quarters, bunks squeezed into the nose of the craft. He collapsed onto one of them. Gwin lay opposite him.

'Do you think we were wrong to go searching for the tablets?' Gwin asked.

'How can one tell?'

'We were warned, after all. The madman on the platform in Luccini.'

'Yes, perhaps.'

'So you think that we should be stopped?'

Hundri rolled onto his side. Whatever position he was in seemed uncomfortable. Gwin's intensity always unnerved him. The dark-haired dwarf's entire character was embodied in his flashing eyes, eyes that seemed to pin whoever they stared at. Hundri didn't want to talk to Gwin at the moment. He wanted to sleep.

'I found something in the ruins beneath Luccini once,' Gwin continued, 'an artifact, ancient, elven perhaps. It was in a hidden tomb beneath a buried garden. The garden was dead. The trees and bushes were just twigs. Even then they were strangely magnificent. In the tomb there was a finely-carved stone sarcophagus decorated in the finest silvers and gems, and on the body within was a pendent of incredible beauty. It radiated – I'm not sure what you'd call it – an aura, I suppose, like some enchantment that was drawing me to it, making me desire it more than life itself. I knew immediately that it was valuable and that I had to have it, but at the last minute I couldn't bring myself to take it from the corpse. Somehow I knew it had to stay there, it was meant to stay there. It wasn't for me to steal and sell to the highest bidder. There are some things that are sacred, yes?'

'Go to sleep, Gwin.'

Gwin sighed, as if disappointed.

Finally Hundri fell into a deep sleep, plagued by frightening dreams. He dreamt that he was walking amongst the Temple of Thantis Tor, the underwater suit clinging to him in the cold water, the air cart behind him, bubbles rising from it towards the surface of the sea. He climbed the steps to

the great domed temple, above which rose towering spires. Down here the sea was green and motes floated in the water like mist. The great doors were open and Hundri passed into a gigantic hall. Pillars of marble rose high above him, to support a massive roof hidden in the darkness above. An altar stood far into the distance beneath a great domed section of the hall. To Hundri it seemed like some great sunken temple of giants, and he could hear, now, the echoing footfalls of feet around him. He turned around and in the chapels to the side of the hall shadowy figures, faceless and cadaverous, called to him. *Hundri, Hundri.* He turned away, but now noticed others, all around him, hooded figures, wispy and wraith-like, as if going along their business. Yet as they passed they would suddenly lean towards him, their faces skeletal and deformed, their mouths gaping. *Hundri, Hundri.*

He found himself running down a massive spiral staircase leading from the back of the hall. Behind him he could feel the presence of more spectres, their clawed hands just inches from his spine. Ahead he could see still more figures, flittering away from him, sometimes out of sight, sometimes holding their arms out like ghostly lovers.

Yes, Hundri, come to us, come to the tombs.

No, not the tombs, he thought, yet he found himself still running.

Down, down, he ran into the bowels of the temple until he found himself suddenly in a huge chamber filled with bones. The tombs, he thought, the catacombs.

Come Hundri, a tall figure, bearded and eyeless said from the far side of the chamber. You want the Tablets Hundri. The Tablets of Akarzan. Come and get them. The figure held forward the stone scrolls in his spectral hands.

Hundri stepped forward.

Come and get them, the specter priest called.

Hundri reached for them and they dissolved suddenly into his hand to the sound of terrible laughter echoing silently down the marble halls.

A stone fell from the ceiling, and another. One struck Hundri in the arm, shattering the bone. Another struck his head and he

fell to his knees. An avalanche followed, piling upon him, burying him beneath a thousand tonnes and more of stone, muffling his screams as they crushed the life out of him.

‘Hundri. Hundri lad, wake up.’

Hundri floated into wakefulness and rubbing his eyes rolled over to find Thon gently shaking him out of his slumber.

‘You best come with me, lad. I’ve found Karel,’ the old dwarf said to him, his tone heavy and morose.

Hundri swiftly pulled on his undergarments and trousers and as he made for the door of the cabin he couldn’t help but notice that Gwin’s and Doirin’s bunks both lay empty.



HUNDRI TURNED away in disgust at the sight of Karel’s corpse. The swollen purple flesh contrasting sharply with his green seaweed-stained beard. His eyes bulged out of their sockets where he’d fought vainly for his last precious breaths of air and the bloody red bandages wrapped around his throat formed what appeared to be a makeshift noose.

‘What... what happened?’ Hundri stammered.

‘I found him hanging from a precipice about a hundred yards from the craft. His helmet was missing and the rocks nearby had been disturbed, as if there had been a struggle,’ Thon said.

‘You’re saying he was murdered?’ exclaimed Gwin.

‘The voices told him to do it,’ came a voice from the doorway of the cabin. The three dwarfs turned to find Dunn standing there, eyes wide and mad, rocking back and forth on his heels. ‘It was the guardians’ punishment for disturbing their resting place. He wasn’t supposed to come here. None of us were supposed to come here.’

‘What are you talking about, you fool,’ Hundri’s voice betraying his frayed nerves. ‘There are no voices. There are no guardians. You’re just—’

Hundri’s speech was suddenly cut short by a thunderous roar from over Dunn’s shoulder. The mad dwarf was thrown forward by the force of the explosion and Hundri had to sidestep swiftly to avoid being bowled over before Dunn’s prostrate form crashed into a bulkhead.

‘Quickly! The engine room,’ yelled Thon.

Hundri rushed through the storeroom, into the passage that led to the rear section of the craft. Figures beat against the flames. Hundri rushed to help using his coat to beat at them.

Exhausted, the fire finally out, they retreated to the storeroom and collapsed on the floor.

It was some time before one of the figures asked: ‘Where’s Doirin?’

They searched the ship. Doirin was nowhere to be found.



THREE OF THEM now met in the storeroom: Hundri, Gwin, and Thon.

Dunn was not with them; he now spent his time putting his head against the hull of the craft, and muttering incoherently to himself. The fire was out. Doirin was gone. The air bristled with suspicion. This second explosion could not have been an accident; the engine was cold. The craft had been sabotaged. Someone wished to see the expedition fail.

Each dwarf sat uncomfortably in the silence. The engine room was blackened and burned, the pipes like the scarred insides of a great creature. The engine could not be repaired. Not now, not with Doirin gone and Dunn’s mind broken by the stress.

Even now Hundri could hear the mad dwarf’s mutterings echoing down through the craft, punctuated by sudden rising laughter that was cut off suddenly before the muttering started again.

Finally Hundri spoke. ‘There are only three suits left,’ he said. No one needed to complete the thought. They all just sat listening to Dunn’s mutterings.

Hundri yawned. He was so tired. He stretched his arms, shook his head. Now wasn’t the time to sleep. But he couldn’t

clear his head. His breath was so long, so regular, his heartbeat so slow. He tried to open his eyes. They closed again. He opened them with a struggle. Thon was on his side, snoring quietly on a bag of coal. Gwin was curled in a corner. Hundri closed his eyes again and felt himself begin to fall back into semi-consciousness. He struggled and then suddenly his heart began beating wildly. How long had they been lying there?

'Gwin, Gwin,' he called.

Gwin groaned, asleep.

Hundri shook himself again and leapt up. 'Thon, Gwin, wake up.' He shook Thon who stirred. 'There's something wrong.'

'What is it lad?'

'The air, the air,' Hundri blurted out. 'I think we're running out of air.'

Thon staggered to his feet. 'By Grugni, you're right.'

Gwin rose groggily. 'There's a valve somewhere, to open the second air tank. It's along the passageway to the engine-room.'

Hundri hurried to the passageway, his legs heavy as lead, his breath coming fast and short. The lack of air had made him weak.

Dunn stood motionless against the pipes that led along the wall. His face was serene, as if he was sleeping after a long journey, but his eyes were open.

'Dunn, Dunn, the air's running out,' Hundri said. 'Where's the valve to change the air tanks?'

Dunn's eyes were like the openings to a dark and cold cave. Saliva dripped down his beard. He leaned towards Hundri and grasped him suddenly by the shoulders. 'You have the face of the dead,' he said to Hundri. 'You have the face of the dead.'

Hundri pushed him away with whatever strength he could muster while Gwin and Thon searched the pipes along the passage wall. 'It's here somewhere, I just can't remember which one,' Gwin said.

'No, it's behind one of these panels.' Hundri began to work on the panels along the bottom of the wall. Behind the first was only piping.

'It's not there,' Gwin said.

'It is.' Hundri opened the second and immediately threw himself back. Doirin's head lolled from behind the panel, his face battered and swollen, some teeth missing,

others jutting through bloodied lips. In the darkness it was a vision of horror and Hundri's heart was chilled.

'What is it?' Thon asked.

Hundri stared at Doirin's face, crumbled and broken, as if he were staring down his own fate.

'By Grugni's beard,' Thon said.

Hundri replaced the panel, as if nothing had happened at all, hiding the broken face.

'Who searched this passageway?' Thon asked. Gwin and Hundri remained silent. 'Grimnir's oath! Who searched this passageway?' Thon's voice boomed, spraying his beard with saliva.

Hundri turned. 'Dunn!'

From somewhere there was the sound of a hatch closing.

'He's escaping,' Gwin shouted.

They rushed to the hatch and found that there were two remaining suits.

'Damn him,' Gwin pulled at his braided hair in frustration.

'So it was him,' Thon sat down calmly. 'He has ruined the expedition.'

Hundri and Gwin sat down also, in defeat.

'Might we be able to use the suits to make our way to land?' Hundri said.

'Who knows?' Thon said.

'We could try,' Gwin said, 'and we could send a rescue team.'

'It's no use, lads,' Thon said calmly, 'you'll never find the submersible from the surface. One of us will have to stay behind, to keep the guardians company.'

They waited for a while in the darkness.

'I've had a long life,' Thon said eventually. 'I don't mind staying down here. At least it's peaceful. There's no family feuds down here. No petty squabbles, no hatreds – there's nothing but the soft sound of the sea to lull me to sleep. Goodbye, lads.'

And ignoring Hundri's protests he turned and climbed the ladder to the upper deck of the craft.



SUITED UP, Hundri released the hatch that opened out into the ocean. Again he became aware of the light filtering through the blue-green water. He strode forward, dragging his cart behind him.

Ahead of him another cart was perched up against a rock, the air-hose and the straps led towards the cliff. Hundri crossed the short distance with trepidation. The tracks led straight from the crippled submersible towards the abyss. There were no deviations, no second thoughts. Hundri reached the edge of the precipice and again he felt vertigo. His head swam at the watery depths below him and the drop down onto the sunken temple of Thantis Tor. He leaned over the cliff and there, dangling from the end of his twisted lines was the body of Dunn, the air-hose disconnected from the helmet. Dunn had finally joined the guardians of the deep.

The implications of Dunn's suicide slowly filtered through Hundri's mind. Dunn could have been the saboteur, if he had been insane before the first explosion. But he was of sound mind before the first explosion. And where would the explosives have come from? It was not Thon, who had let him and Gwin go free. It may have been Karel, who was out in the water preying on them, sneaking aboard to kill Doirin, to plant the second bomb but now Karel was dead. Or perhaps it was...

Where is he, thought Hundri? He was right behind me on the ramp when we were putting the suits on but where is he now? He started to hurry back towards the submersible and to the hatch from where he'd emerged into the water. His aircart weighed heavy at his back and impeded his progress as it's small wheels caught against loose shingle on the seabed. How could I have been so blind? Gwin was the only one who could have killed Karel and that comment he made in the bunk cabin about some things being-

Suddenly the hatch opened and Thon's form floated out into the murky depths, blood trailing through the water from deep wounds to his face and head. Hundri fought against the current in an attempt to reach Thon in the vain hope that he could do something to aid him despite knowing deep down that the old dwarf was beyond any help he could receive in this world.

As he passed under the hatch a dark shape emerged, catching him on the side of the head and sending him sprawling to the seabed. Hundri tried to pick himself up but the pressure of the mighty ocean weighed heavy upon his diminutive body and his progress was slow.

Suddenly he was thrown over the precipice. He grasped behind him, at the rocks but all he clutched was the floating sand disturbed by his scrabbling feet. Suddenly he was falling, slower than he expected, as he tried to reach the cliff face just arm lengths away. Above him he could see the suited figure of Gwin, and he thought he could discern the glint of fanatical eyes, eyes of the zealot and everything became clear to him.

The fall was slow and inexorable. There was nothing he could do.

Suddenly the lines strapped tight and he was hurled against the cliff face, scrabbling for a foothold. Somehow, he knew, his cart had become tangled against Dunn's. Now they were both hard up against the rock above. There was still hope that he might survive.

Beside him he noticed the dangling corpse of Dunn, his eyes strangely peaceful behind the glass of the helmet.

Hundri grabbed the straps that attached him to the air-cart and started to pull himself up. At any moment he expected the lines to suddenly give way, or for the cart to plummet over the cliff under his weight and send him screaming silently to the temple beneath, lurking like some submarine monster waiting for its prey.

But for a few moments nothing happened. Hundri climbed desperately, the weight of the suit incredible, his desperation driving him on – one hand over the other.

He breathed water and coughed violently.

Holding on to the straps, his body shook uncontrollably. Beside him his air hose floated down. Gwin had disconnected it from the air-cart.

Hundri, still coughing, somehow dragged himself up higher, up, up, to the lip of the cliff.

Gwin's foot struck him in the head. He was thrown back, but the helmet protected him, and the force of the blow was weak due to the resistance of the water.

A foot was then placed against Hundri's head and he was pushed backwards slowly.

His lungs burned and his mind screamed at him to open his mouth, to breathe. He kept it shut and lashed out with one arm. It connected with something and the foot against Hundri's head was suddenly gone.

Hundri dragged himself over the edge of the cliff. He leaped to his feet searching for his air-cart and the valve into which his hose fitted. It was lodged against Dunn's, air bubbling quickly from the valve.

Gwin came at a run, slow in the water but gathering momentum with each step. Inside his helmet Gwin's eyes were cold and hard.

Just as Gwin came close to him Hundri threw himself sideways, away from the body of the other dwarf, out of its trajectory.

Gwin ground to a halt, but his air-cart came after him. Hundri leaped behind the cart and pushed as hard as he could towards the zealot – and towards the cliff.

He could see the sudden horror in the fanatic's eyes as the cart hurtled forwards.

Gwin put his hands out but the cart struck him with too much force. The fanatic was thrown backwards off the cliff, still clutching his air-cart and dropped suddenly from sight.

Hundri fell to his knees.

Suddenly the two air-carts against the rock were thrown into the air behind him. Gwin's cart had caught onto Dunn's dead body over the cliff and the combined weight had loosed the carts tangled against the rock. With considerable speed they were both dragged towards the cliff. One of them was Hundri's, to which the dwarf was still attached. Unless it was freed he too would be dragged over the precipice.

In one last desperate action Hundri threw himself at an angle away from the two carts. By some work of fate his straps pulled his cart free from the other and he collapsed safely onto the ocean floor. He struggled to his knees, his lungs burning and he crawled towards the cart. The last things he saw were the bubbles rising from the still unconnected valve. Everything faded to white.

HE WAS breathing. Slow regular breaths. Above him the ocean appeared heavy, dark and foreboding. He thought about that for a moment.

He raised his head to see the crippled submersible perched at the edge of the precipice. He struggled to his knees, then to his feet.

His hose was attached to the air-cart. How it had been connected he could not say. Was it some last desperate action of his before he passed out? Or had some other force intervened?

He walked towards the abyss and slowly the temple came into view beneath him, a slumbering menace, it seemed to him, yet now, with the soft light filtering down from the sea surface it was beautiful. It was dreamlike, in some way unreal, as if painted in soft sub-marine hues: emerald and aqua in different shades. It was unreachable and perhaps, he thought, that was how it was meant to be. Perhaps its secrets were best kept on the seabed, fathoms beneath the surface. Perhaps it was best left to itself, and its guardians. Even now Hundri thought he could hear something echoing through the water, some far off voice singing. He cocked his head. Yes, there it was, a voice high, lilting. It seemed to Hundri to be the saddest thing he had heard.

Beneath him Hundri could make out two tiny figures lying on the steps before the great domed temple. Beside them lay two shattered carts. Dunn had finally got his wish. And Gwin? Well, he had achieved his goal. Now they lay in the arms of Thantis Tor, beneath the sea, looked over by the guardians.

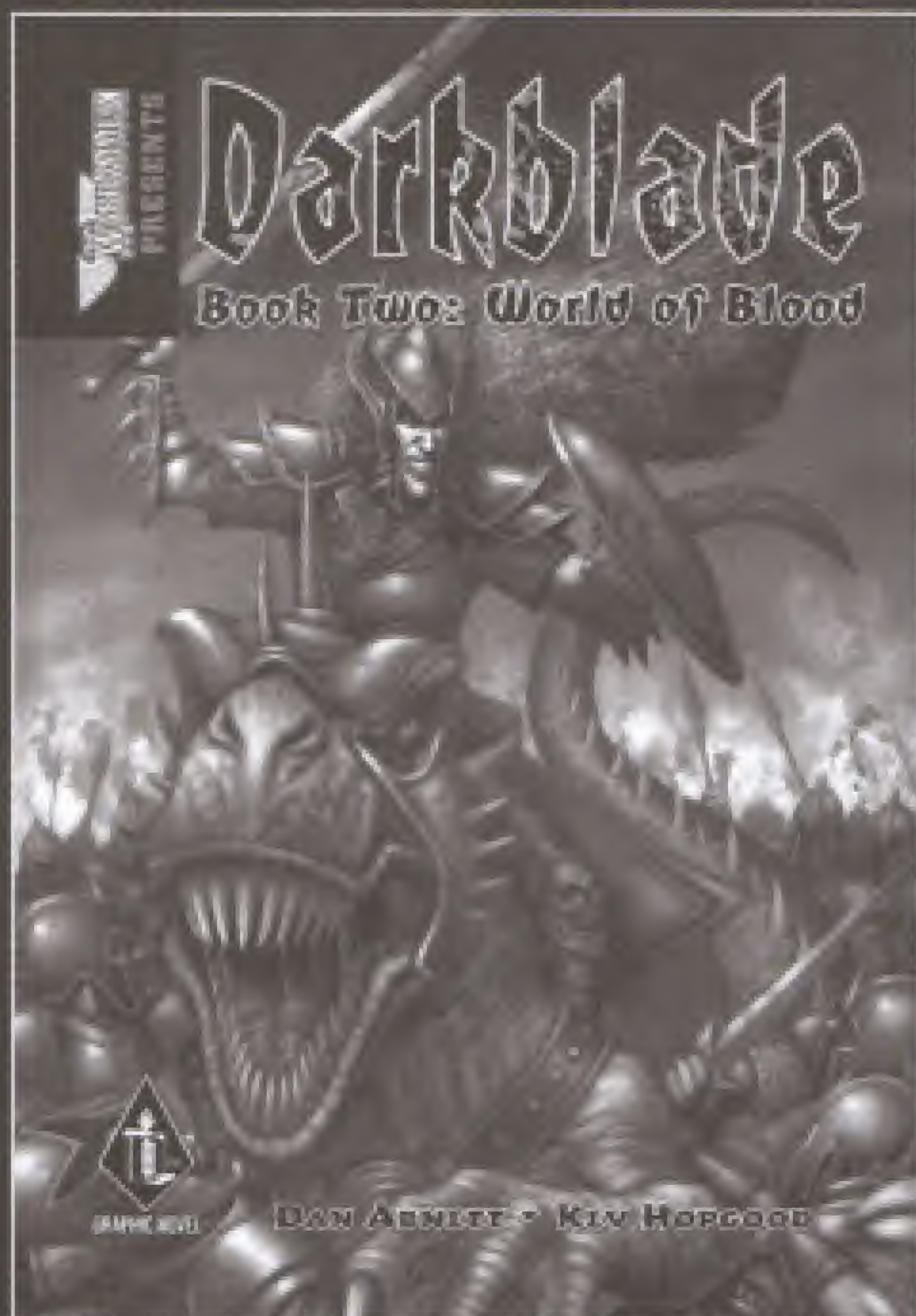
Hundri turned away. If he was to make the shore he would have a long journey. Perhaps he would run out of air. Perhaps he would meet his fate along the way. But he would try. He began the walk, a tiny figure against the massive underwater landscape, but somehow he felt at home. ♣



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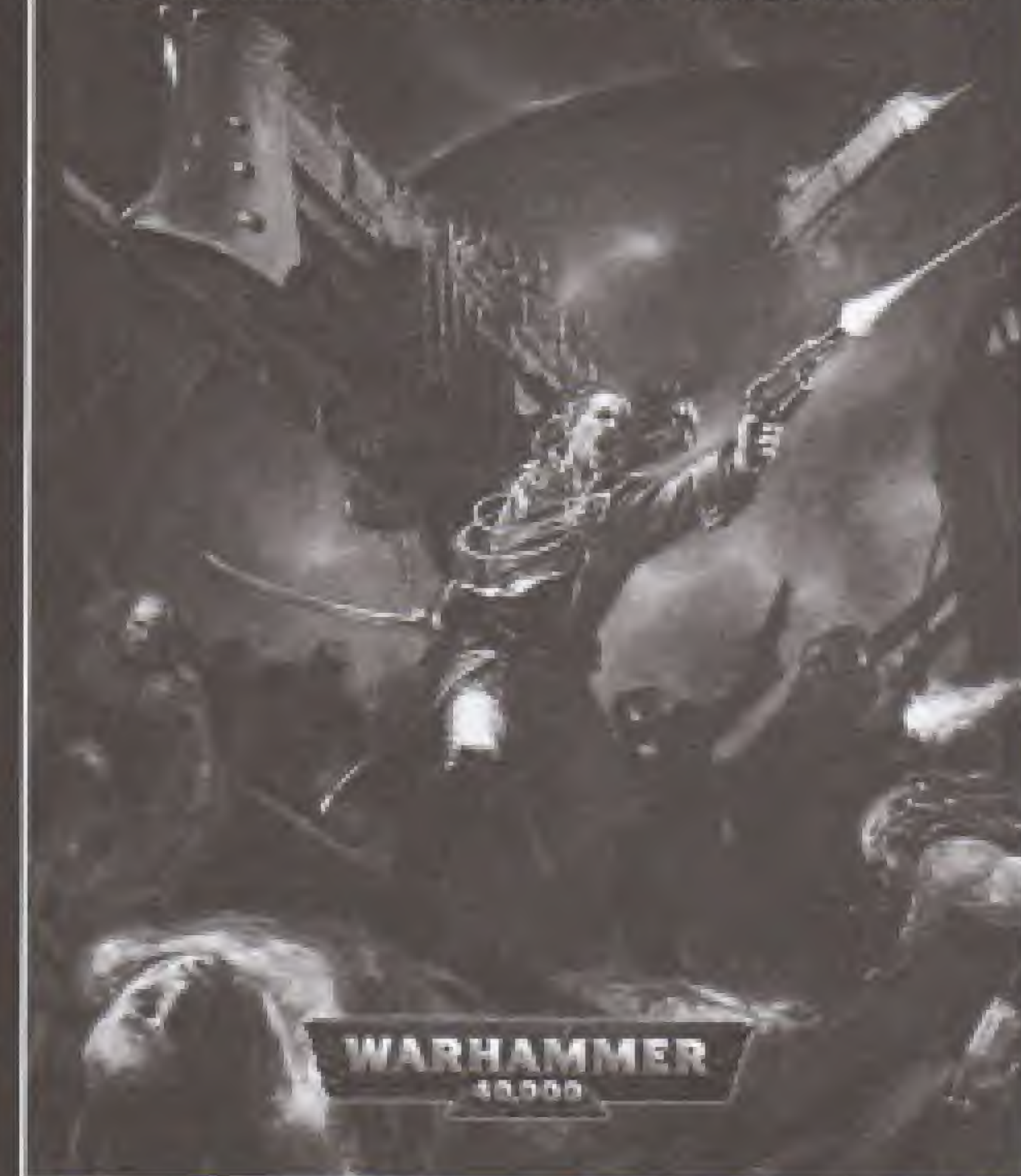
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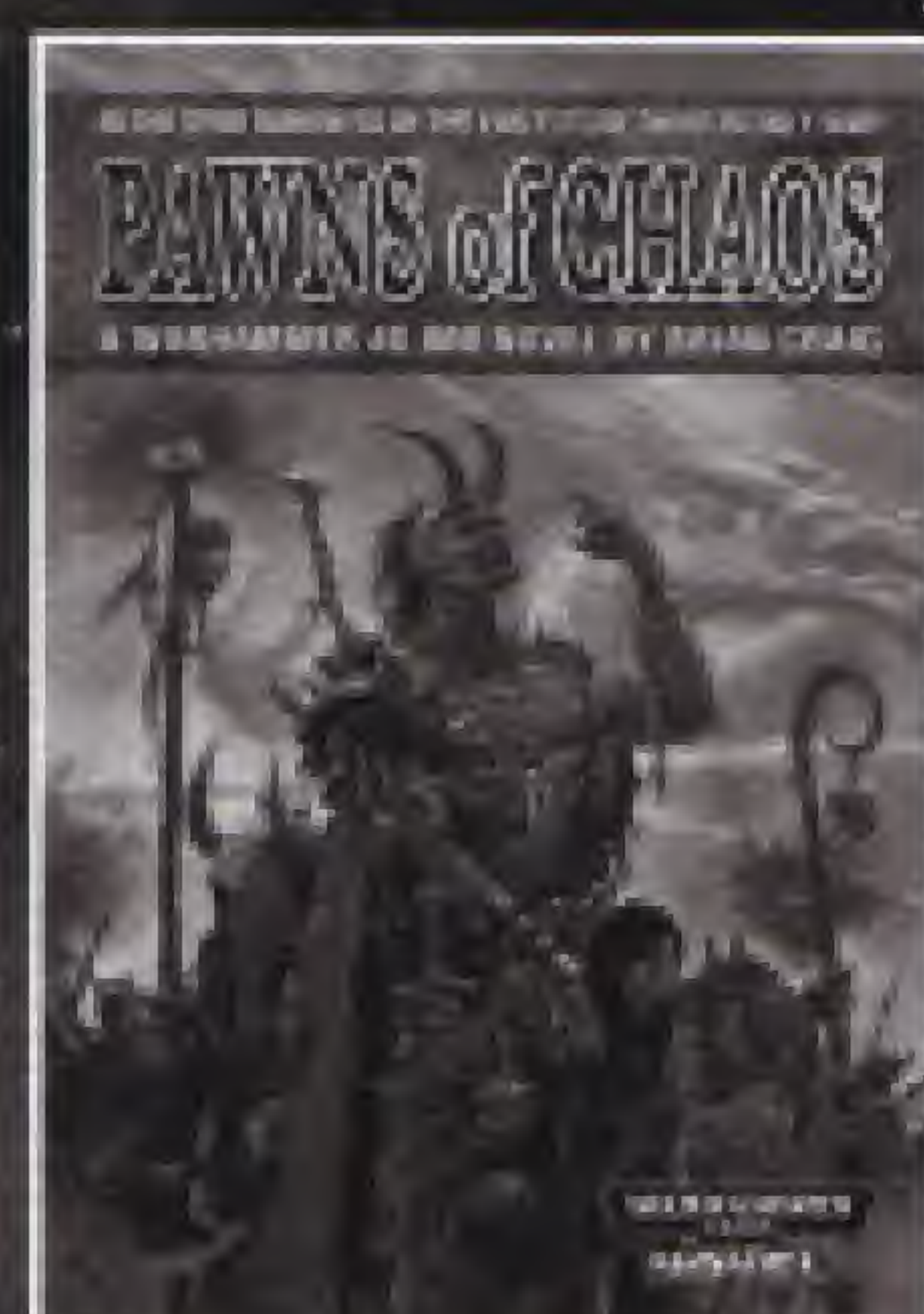
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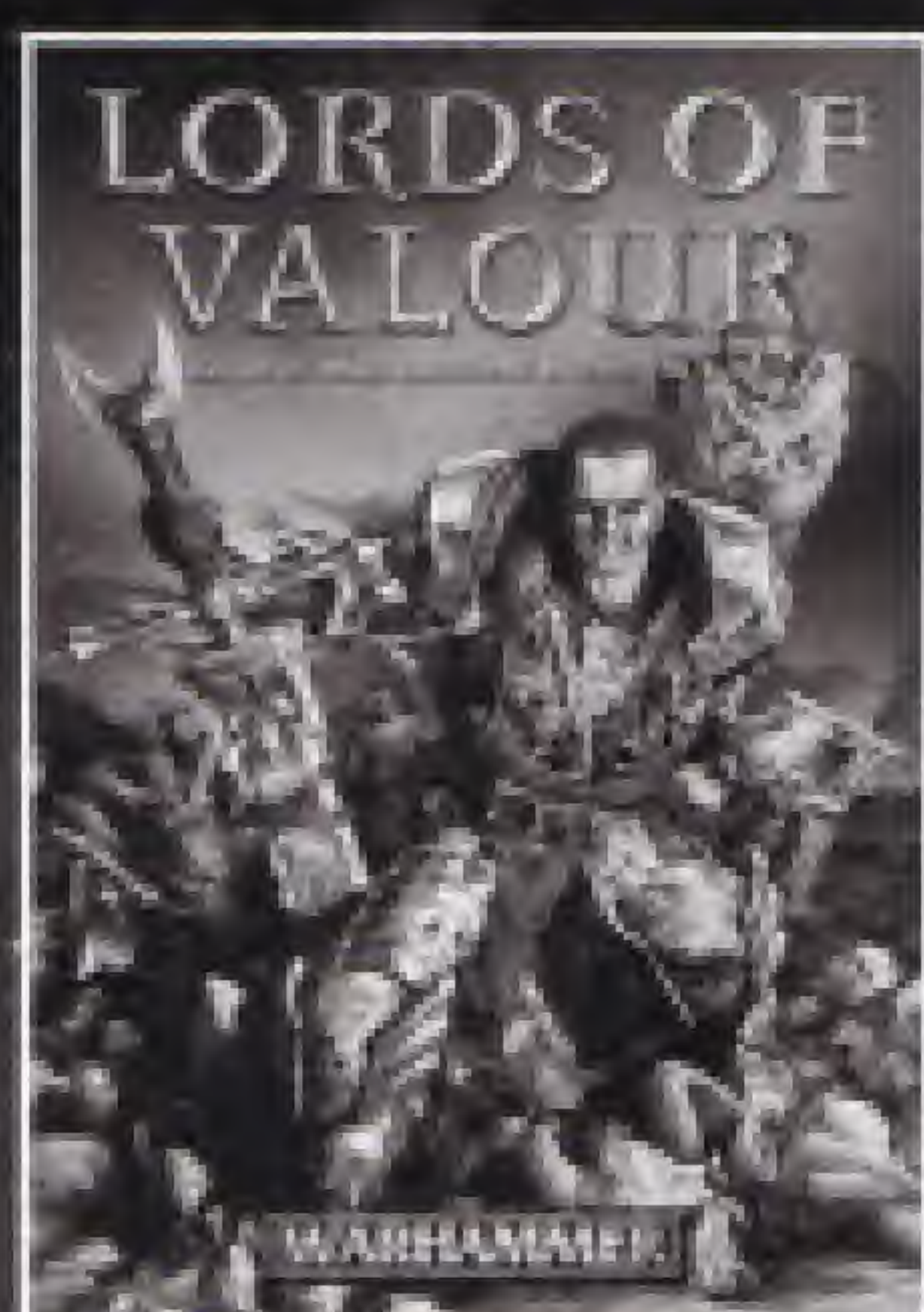
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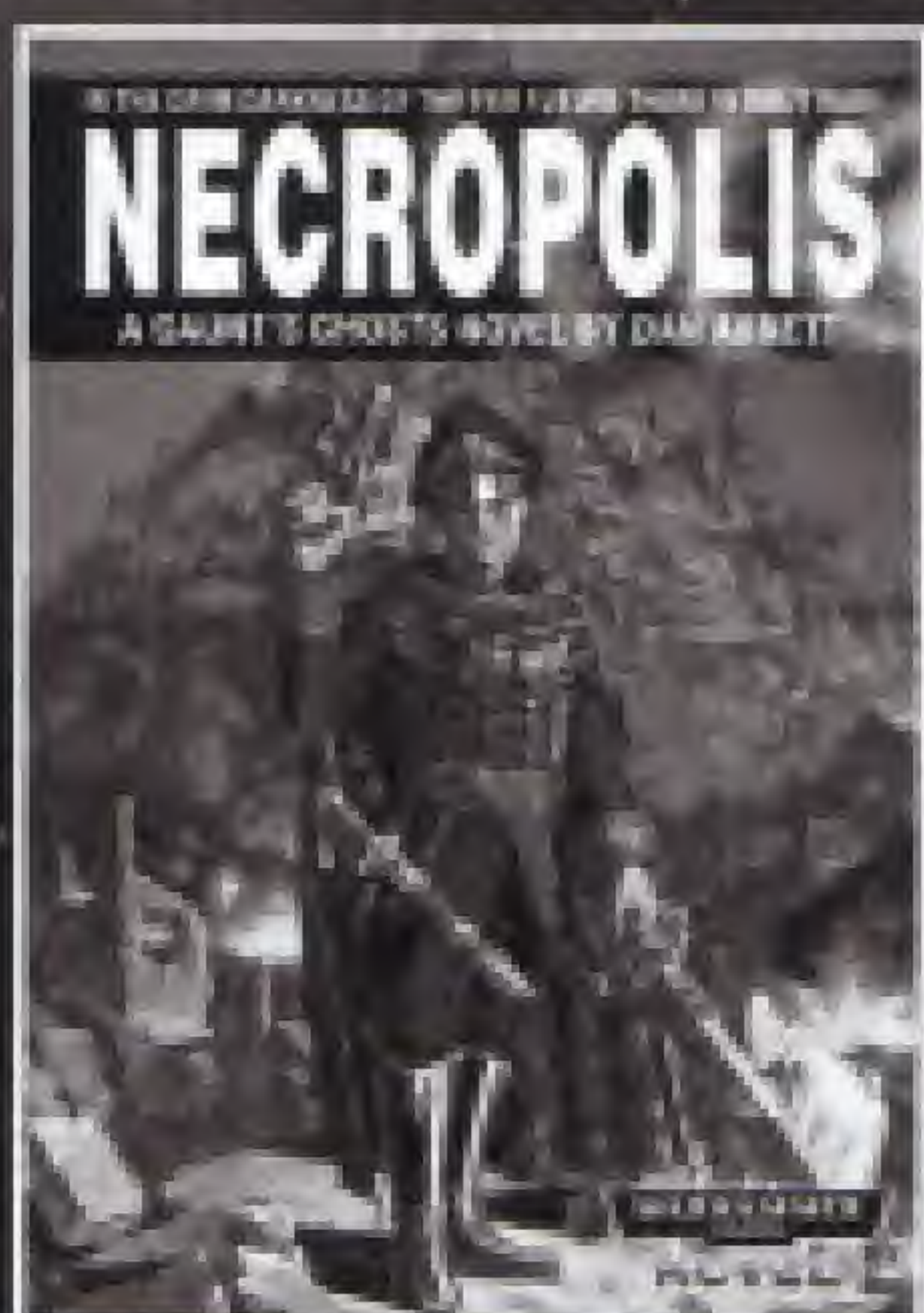
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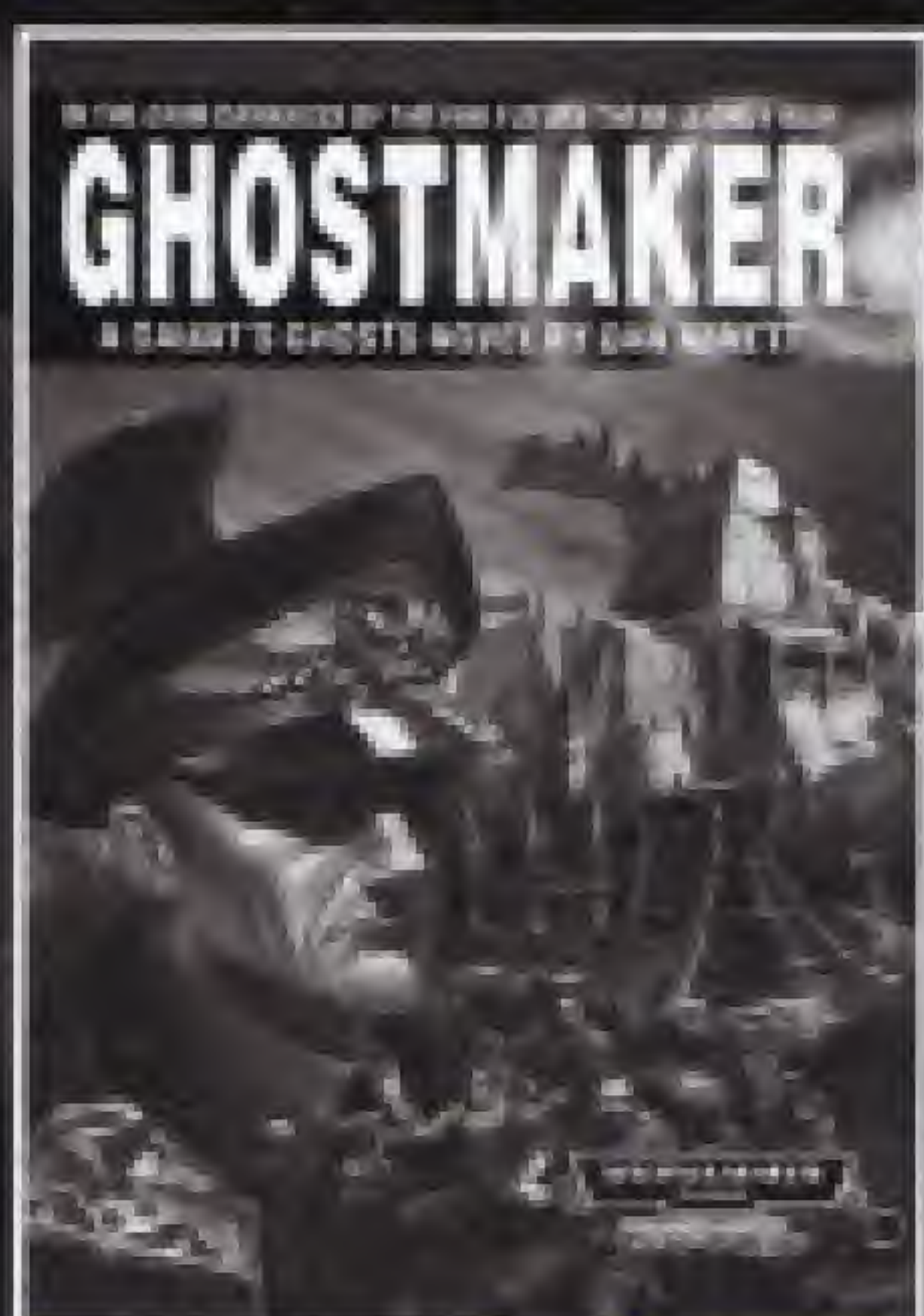
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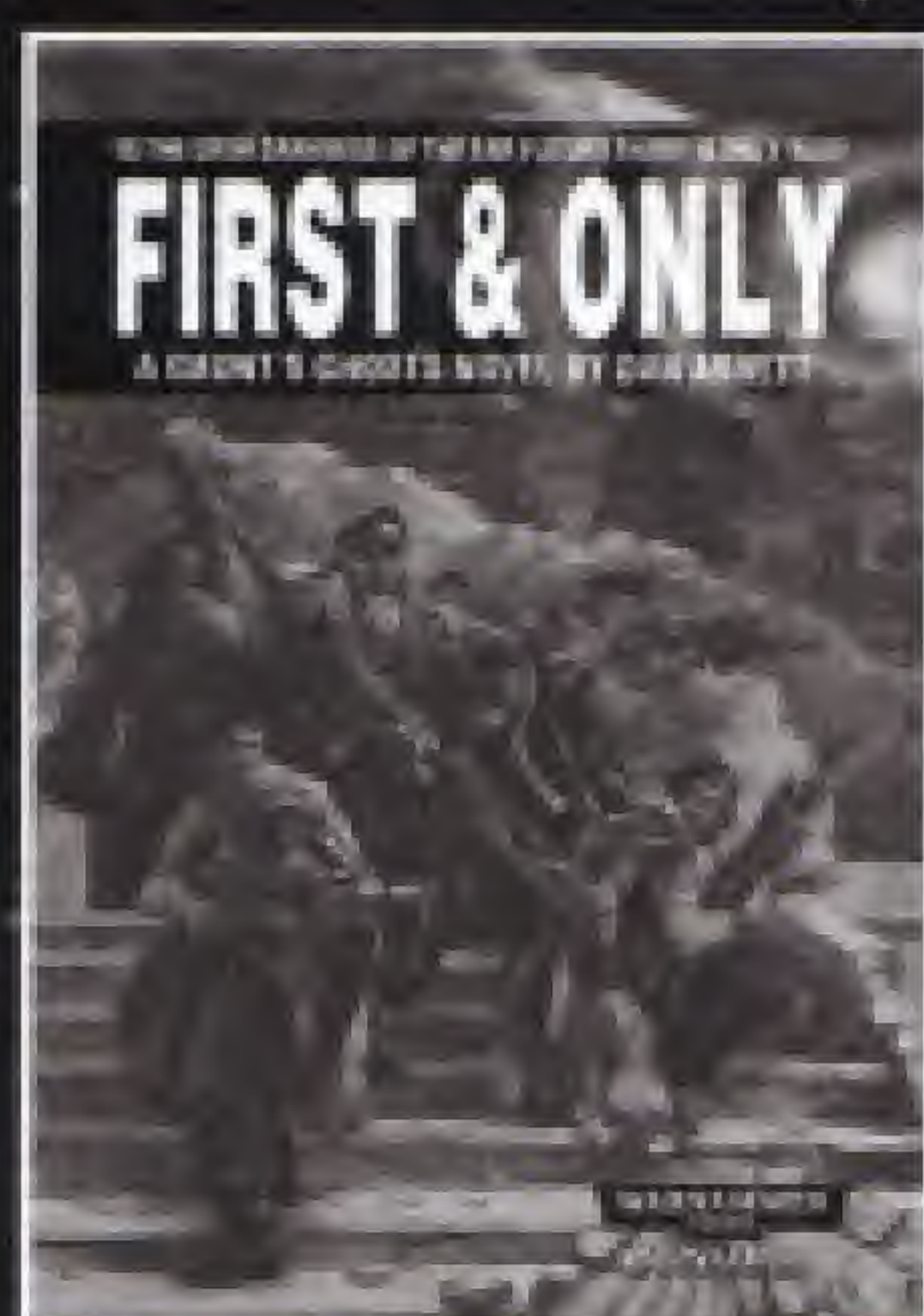
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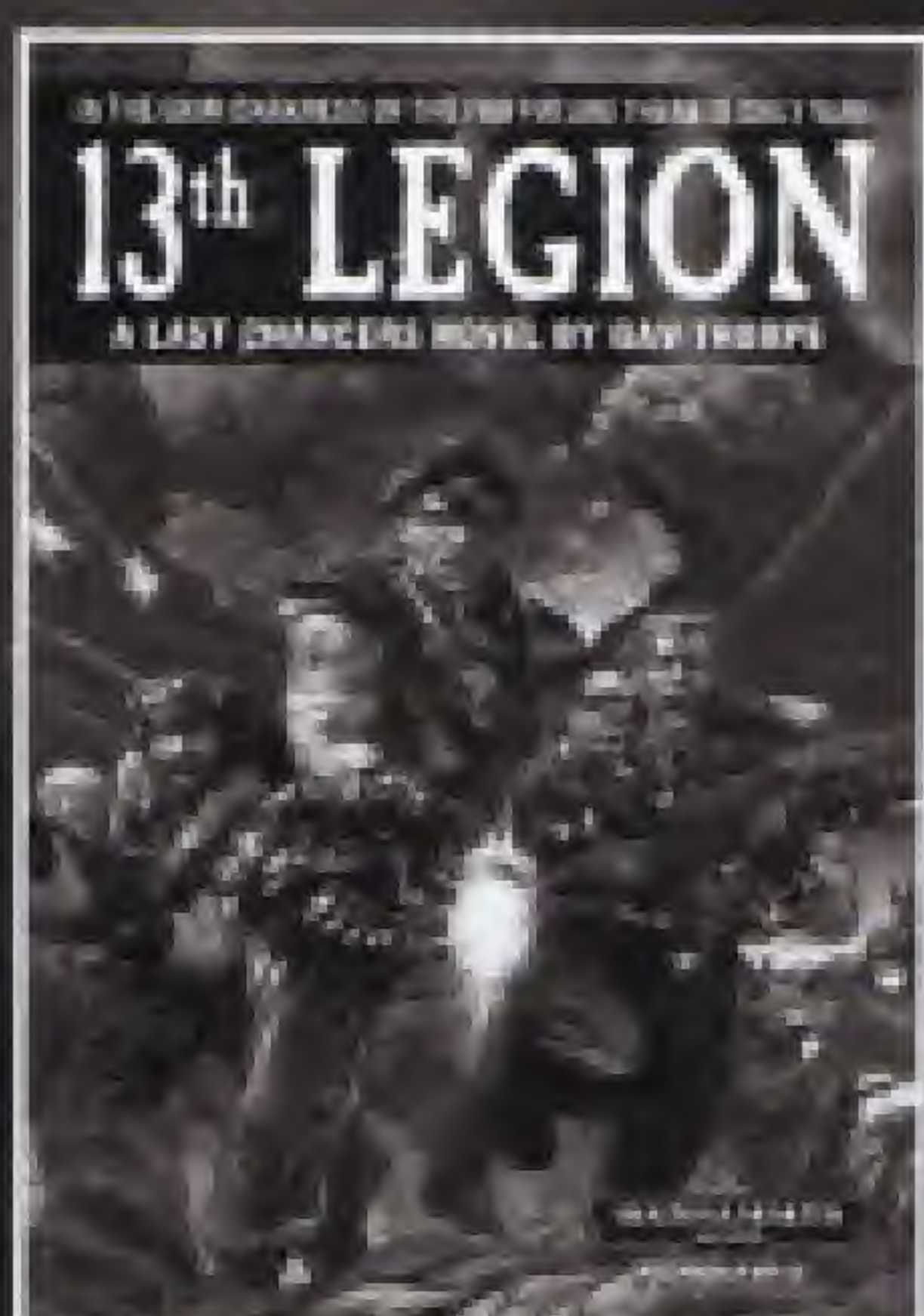
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